The Journey Back: Revisiting Childhood Trauma

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THE JOURNEY BACK: REVISITING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

BY

RUTH A. LIPMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in French in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in French in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

THE JOURNEY BACK: REVISITING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

by

Ruth A. Lipman

Adviser: Professor Nancy K. Miller

This dissertation examines the adult’s endeavor to revisit childhood trauma in four sets of literary texts that are not typically studied together. These works, all published after 1968, address the central problem of revisiting childhood trauma in order to open a potential for mourning and sometimes for healing. I explore connections between individual/family trauma and collective/historical trauma. I argue that the use of objects and/or photographs is integral to the process of touching and representing the buried, embodied wounds of childhood, propelling the journeys and conveying the experience to the reader. Each pairing of literary works concerns a different kind of journey. Saul Friedländer’s *Quand vient le souvenir* and Sarah Kofman’s *Rue Ordener/rue Labat* emerge from the experiences of children, both members of the 1.5 generation of Holocaust survivors, who were hidden in France during World War II. Philippe Grimbert’s *Un Secret* and Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* are suffused with the presence of absence in which the first-person narrators, children of Holocaust survivors, who experience feelings of belatedness characteristic of the second generation, try to unravel secrets about people who perished during the Holocaust. Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Annie Ernaux’s *L’Autre fille* contrast texts with substantial differences in genre, style, setting and situation, but Danticat’s novel and Ernaux’s memoir *L’Autre fille* both focus on central themes of shame and secrecy. Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire* and Marie-Célie Agnant’s *Le Livre d’Emma* explore the theme of hidden truth. Locating embodied trauma and expressing it to an empathic
witness is the difficult and liberating trajectory of these two narratives. The analyses utilize a range of theoretical approaches such as theory about testimonial objects, postmemory and traumatic realism. I emphasize the role of the empathic witness as well as literary devices and structures (such as metaphors, homonyms and intertextuality) that are part of this process.
Dedicated to the memory of my parents, Sue and Jack Lipman.
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Introduction

Why would an adult choose to travel back to revisit childhood trauma? Why wrestle with dark episodes from long ago? My dissertation focuses upon the journey back to childhood trauma as a possible means of healing that can enable one to live in the present. Literature can be a powerful vehicle for making these journeys. The literary works that I examine in my dissertation are: Saul Friedländer’s *Quand vient le souvenir* (1978), Sarah Kofman’s *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* (1994), Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* (1997), Philippe Grimbert’s *Un Secret* (2004), Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), Marie-Célie Agnant’s *Le Livre d’Emma* (2001), Annie Ernaux’s *L’Autre fille* (2011) and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). These eight works, all published after 1968, address this central problem: the endeavor to revisit and represent childhood trauma in order to open a potential for mourning and sometimes for healing.

The difficult process of finding language with which to express and transmit traumatic experience that is held in the body is integral to the journey back. How does the writer represent this traumatic experience as a narrative and where does the writing take him/her? What happens when writers travel back in time in order to confront childhood trauma? How do they make the journey back? What techniques do they use to represent the process of revisiting childhood trauma? How do these post-war writers represent traumatic events in first person narratives--some autobiographical, some fictional? How do they convey the experience that is located in the family where the first person narrator is the child writing as an adult through memory? These are the central questions my dissertation will address.
While most of the work done on trauma and related topics in the primary texts that I study treats each book separately, as part of a corpus of works by individual authors, or juxtaposed with other similar works of literature, I examine the adult’s endeavor to revisit childhood trauma in four sets of primary texts that are not typically studied together as pairs. Each pairing focuses upon a different kind of journey. In chapter 1, the focus of my study is upon the impossibility of fully comprehending what has happened because of the child’s age at the time of the traumatic event(s) and the disruption of identity formation resulting in a split or “twoness.” Sarah Kofman and Saul Friedländer both belong to what Susan Suleiman calls the 1.5 generation of Holocaust survivors. In their autobiographical texts, the child’s secure life within the family is irrevocably shattered.

In chapter 2, I study Philippe Grimbert’s *Un Secret* (2004) and Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* (1997) together because both Modiano and Grimbert are children of Holocaust survivors. *Un Secret* is characterized as a novel, but it is semi-autobiographical. According to Denise Cima, *Dora Bruder* is situated between biography and autobiography; it contains elements of autofiction as well (Cima. *Etude sur Patrick Modiano* 3-4; 14-15). Despite the differences in genre, there are common themes that link these two works. As the narrators take journeys into periods of history that preceded their births, they seek answers to unanswered questions about trauma that was passed down to them as a legacy of shadows. I examine the representation of these journeys from haunting to healing.

In chapter 3 (“Shameful Secrets”) I pair Edwidge Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Annie Ernaux’s latest memoir *L’Autre fille* (2011). *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a fictional work, set in Haiti and in the United States, about a young woman, Sophie Cacao, who

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1 Steven Jaron refers to this group as the liminal generation. See Jaron 207.
2 Autofiction is a term invented by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. In a work of autofiction, the narrator has the same first name as the author; however, the writer invents another life for himself, modifying his own. See Cima 107.
had been conceived through rape and her life with her fragile, psychotic mother, Martine. 

*L’Autre fille*, set in France, is structured as a letter to Ernaux’s sister, Ginette, who died in 1938—two years before Ernaux’s birth in 1940. Both works concern a daughter’s shame. According to Silvan Tomkins, the experience of shame is deeply wounding (Sedgwick and Frank 133). In each of these books, the daughter works through the shame as well as through related aspects of transgenerational trauma, using photographs to shape her odyssey. There are differences between these texts, but they share the first-person narrator’s engagement with family photographs as well as a common focus upon the enduring effects of shame.

In chapter 4 (“The Journey with the Empathic Witness”) I read Marie Cardinal’s autobiographical novel *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) with Marie-Célie Agnant’s imaginary novel *Le Livre d’Emma* (2001). There are substantial differences between these two texts. *Les Mots pour le dire*, set in Algeria and France and published at the height of the French feminist movement in France, is based upon Cardinal’s psychoanalytic journey from debilitating emotional and physical illness to health. In contrast, *Le Livre d’Emma* is a work of fiction set in Haiti and Montreal, profoundly influenced by Haiti’s history of slavery. Cardinal’s narrator, a descendant of white French colonizers in Algeria and Agnant’s protagonist, Emma, a descendant of Africans forced into slavery in the French colony of Haiti, both struggle with embodied trauma resulting from childhood abuse by psychotic mothers who tried to abort them. Despite the generic, cultural and historical differences, what ties these two works together in my study is the role of the empathic witness. I focus upon the effects of the relationship between the main character and the empathic witness who accompanies her on her journey back. In Cardinal’s text, the empathic witness is a male psychoanalyst who conducts psychoanalysis with a female patient (Cardinal’s literary counterpart) for a period of seven years. In Agnant’s novel, the empathic
witnesses consist of an informal network of women—most notably Flore, the Creole translator, who interacts with Emma for several months at the psychiatric hospital where Emma is incarcerated. The empathic witness is the catalyst who helps each of the women to find the words with which to articulate embodied trauma.

My study highlights the role of photographs and other objects. I argue that the use of objects and/or photographs is integral to the process of touching and representing the buried, embodied wounds of childhood, propelling the journeys and conveying the experience to the reader. I emphasize the role of the empathic witness as well as literary devices and structures in these textual journeys (metaphors, homonyms and intertextuality) that, in these contexts, echo characteristics of trauma as well as the process of integrating the traumatic event into a narrative continuum.

The transgenerational nature of trauma as well as the process and difficulty of moving from embodied trauma that repeats through behavior and/or bodily symptoms to narrative structures is crucial to my argument. The child’s trauma is located in the family (and sometimes in his or her enforced separation from it) in all of these first-person narratives where the first person is the child writing as an adult through memory. In addition to articulating the narrator’s own painful journey, writing the story becomes an opportunity for a daughter or son to rewrite and rework a parent’s traumatized past; interconnections between individual/familial trauma and collective/historical trauma are integral to these odysseys.

Theoretical overview

I use an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon psychological, historical and cross-cultural sources. Freud characterizes trauma as an accident--a sudden breaking through of
protective boundaries. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he explores the repetition compulsion that is part of traumatic neurosis wherein the patient does not remember the trauma, nor can she place it in the past; instead she repeatedly acts it out either through behavior or through repetitive dreams. Cathy Caruth elucidates the paradoxical nature of trauma and the difficulties encountered in consciously knowing it and communicating it through language. According to Caruth, the traumatic event is largely unavailable to trauma victims through conscious recall. Instead, images of traumatic reenactment such as flashbacks and traumatic nightmares occur belatedly against their will. She argues that, in order to enable testimony and cure, the traumatic event must be integrated into the conscious mind through language. However, this poses a paradoxical problem for survivors: to remember with the conscious *instead of* with the unconscious mind necessitates forgetting much of the specificity of the traumatic reenactment; to render the unspeakable into language is to diminish it (Caruth. *Trauma: Explorations*, 151-57).

Michael Rothberg addresses the challenges of rendering the unspeakable into language through the concept he calls “traumatic realism.” Rothberg identifies two main approaches to Holocaust studies: realist and anti-realist. The realist approach maintains that the Holocaust is “knowable” and can be communicated through established means of representation such as historical narrative. On the other hand, the anti-realist viewpoint asserts that the Holocaust is not knowable and cannot be conveyed through traditional means of representation (Rothberg. *Traumatic Realism*, 3-4). Traumatic realism mediates between these two positions by juxtaposing and creating tension between the everyday, which is normal and explainable and the extreme, which is inconceivable. As a result, readers experience conceptual dissonance because they are compelled to simultaneously hold on to contradictions.
Susan Suleiman defines the 1.5 generation as “child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there during the Nazi persecution of the Jews” (“The 1.5 Generation… 277). She argues that the 1.5 generation’s shared experience is “premature bewilderment and helplessness” because “the trauma occurred (or at least, began) before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self” (277). Crises of identity are amongst the problems experienced by members of this generation who were persecuted for an identity which they were too young to even fully claim. Suleiman places them into three age groupings: (1) Children who were too young to remember (from infancy to approximately three years old). (2) Children who were old enough to remember but too young to understand (from approximately four to ten years old). (3) Children who were old enough to understand but too young to be responsible for choices made in response to catastrophe (approximately eleven to fourteen years old) (283). The distinction between the second and third grouping centers on the differences in reasoning ability between pre-adolescence and adolescence. “Children under the age of eleven have a different way of understanding what is happening to them from those who are older: the older child possesses the capacity to think hypothetically, to use abstract words appropriately and with understanding, as well as a vocabulary to name the experience that the younger child lacks” (282). Sarah Kofman (born September 14, 1934) and Saul Friedländer (born October 11, 1932) who were both under age eleven when persecution began, belong to the second grouping. Because they were so young, they could not conceptualize what was happening to them in the same ways that adults can. They are amongst the list of writers Suleiman mentions from the 1.5 generation whose literary works
show “both the child’s helplessness and the adult’s attempt to render that helplessness retrospectively, in language” (292).

Eva Hoffman, Marianne Hirsch and Nadine Fresco belong to the second generation—children of Holocaust survivors who were born after World War II. They have no memories of the war or of the Holocaust; yet they are marked by their parents’ traumatic experiences. Indeed, Hoffman aptly described members of this generation as having “inherited not experience, but its shadows” (Hoffman 66). Hirsch developed the concept of postmemory and applies it to this generation. “‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right….To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension” (Hirsch, The Generation of Postmemory 5). Fresco describes a pervasive silence about the war years. “The silence formed like a heavy pall that weighed down on everyone. Parents explained nothing, children asked nothing. The forbidden memory of death manifested itself only in the form of incomprehensible attacks of pain” (Fresco 418). Some of these children grasped fragments of information from bits of conversations overheard, from photos and other traces. Many lived in a zone of uncertainty, surrounded by silences, yet simultaneously knowing and not knowing about the existence of perished siblings and other family members.3

3 For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Fresco.
According to Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, testimonial objects are “points of memory — points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal and cultural recollection” (Hirsch and Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects” 353). Testimonial objects are material objects that can be “catalysts of witness” (Abrams and Kacandes 15). They can bear witness to events and elicit testimonial encounters between generations (Hirsch and Spitzer, “The Tile Stove” 145). They can re-animate body memories, evoke habit memory and primal associations (Hirsch and Spitzer, “The Tile Stove” 143). As points of memory, testimonial objects travel across time and space (Hirsch and Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects,” 358). In “The Tile Stove,” Hirsch and Spitzer describe their trip to the Ukraine in 1998 with Hirsch’s parents. When they visited Hirsch’s mother’s childhood home, the tile stoves that remained evoked memories for her and became the focus of a testimonial encounter between generations that offered Hirsch and Spitzer “some potential insight” into “a private lifeworld” that preceded the Holocaust. They call this “participatory witnessing” (142). Finally, the testimonial object can bear witness to “a prior meaningful existence” even if one does not know specifically who existed. For example, the discovery of long locks of hair in a box amongst her deceased father’s possessions prompted Nancy K. Miller to do research that enabled her to weave a story about the unknown owner of the locks of hair — a story that is both individual and collective (Miller. “Family Hair Looms” 163-64).

Evelyne Ender argues that “our ability to create a record of past experiences provides the foundations of human individuality” and that “writers are the exemplary architects of mnemonic scenes” (Architexts of Memory 3, 5). In Architexts of Memory, she links aesthetics with psychological and neurological research and examines the construction of memory scenes in works of literature.
In my study of the role of photographs in these journeys to revisit childhood trauma, I refer to the concept of the *punctum* (the detail in the photographs that pricks or wounds) which Roland Barthes develops in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 26-27). Barthes reflects upon the notion of time as *punctum*. “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott’s psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe” (Barthes 96). In *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch discusses the oscillation between life and death in relation to photography and the Holocaust. She argues that photographs of Holocaust atrocities and photographs of domestic scenes that preceded it are complementary because “[i]n both cases, the viewer fills in what the picture leaves out: the horror of looking is not necessarily in the image but in the story the viewer provides to fill in what has been omitted. For each image we provide the other complementary one” (*Family Frames* 21).

Dori Laub’s work on listening to Holocaust testimony, which draws upon psychoanalytic models, builds on the concept of the empathic witness—“an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Laub. “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Theory* 68). Laub argues that in the world of the Holocaust there was no longer an addressable “thou”—someone who could listen and recognize the speaker as a subject. Because “one could not [even] bear witness to oneself,” history and identity were annihilated. He argues that the process of giving testimony allows for the possibility of reconstituting the internal thou, the internal witness (“An Event without a Witness” 82, 85).

Laub relates the story of a little boy who created his own internal witness by talking to a photograph of his mother during the years that he managed to survive without his parents on the
streets of Krakow, Poland. The boy’s parents, who had heard that all the children were to be rounded up and deported, managed to get their child out of the ghetto. Beforehand, the mother gave her four-year-old son a photograph of herself and told him to turn to it when he needed to. His parents promised to find him after the war was over. Laub argues that this creation of the internal witness helped the boy to survive; it also made him more capable of placing the events into a narrative later. However, although his parents survived, they returned vastly altered by the suffering they endured in the concentration camp. The real mother no longer resembled the mother in the photograph. As a result, the child, who lost the holding power of his internal witness (the image in the photograph), felt like a helpless victim. He began to have recurrent nightmares where he was on a conveyor belt which he could not stop; it was moving him towards a metal compactor that would crush him to death. When, as an adult, he decided to bear witness to his childhood trauma by giving testimony he was able to stop the conveyor belt during his dream. “I feel strongly,” he stated, “that it has to do with the fact that I decided to open up” (“An Event without a Witness” 90). Laub’s interpretation is, "[o]nce the link to the listener has been reestablished in his mind, once no longer along (sic) and without a witness, he is able to stop the death machine in his dream without having to wake up. Coincidentally he expresses the fact that for the first time in his life he was able to experience feelings of fear as well" (90-91). I will return to Laub’s interpretation of this incident in my discussion of Les Mots pour le dire in chapter 4.

The study of the Holocaust has had a crucial impact upon trauma theory. Theories developed in connection with Holocaust representation such as traumatic realism, postmemory and testimonial objects and the internal witness are critical tools for studying other catastrophic events. I apply these theories in my readings of texts which are not about the Holocaust in
chapters 3 and 4. In this post-Holocaust age, works about trauma from different cultures resonate with one another. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma becomes a history belatedly through the listening of another. Indeed, “[i]n a catastrophic age… trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations* 11). Michael Rothberg explores the relationship between writing about the Holocaust and writing about other kinds of collective trauma such as colonialism and slavery. There are resonances between the Holocaust and colonialism and the Holocaust is sometimes used as a metaphor or analogy for other events and histories (*Multidirectional Memory* 11, 21). These intersections inflect the narratives of the era (“Between Auschwitz and Algeria” 160). Rothberg focuses upon agents and sites of memory (spatial, temporal, and cultural) and their interaction where there is a dialogue or an overlap between the memories of different groups (*Multidirectional Memory* 4-5, 11). He identifies the early 1960’s as being “a nodal point” between the histories of the Holocaust and of Algeria; for example, the Eichmann trial in Israel and the massacre of Algerian demonstrators in Paris both took place in 1961 (“Between Auschwitz and Algeria” 158). Drawing upon Rothberg’s model, I include resonances and intersections between the Holocaust and histories of Haiti and Algeria as they pertain to the narrators’ journeys in chapters 3 and 4.

While the early 1960’s were an important time for the articulation of Holocaust testimony as well as postcolonialism, the events of 1968 provided impetus for the feminist movement. In the early 1970’s, the women's movement coalesced into the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (the MLF), "a galaxy of varying related or divergent groups" (Cavallaro 16). According to Jane Gallop, “[i]n France as throughout the world, the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an enormous surge of feminist consciousness and activity." Its central text is Hélène Cixous’s “Le Rire de la Méduse” (1975) (Gallop 1045-46). Cixous urges women to break the silence and write
themselves into history: "Il faut que la femme se mette au texte -- comme au monde, et à
l'histoire --, de son propre mouvement" (Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse” 37). Indeed, the “quest
for self-expression” has been the major theme of women’s writing since 1968 (Robson, Writing
Wounds 14). The body became an important component of the writing process. Cixous tells
women: "Écris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre. Alors jailliront les immenses
ressources de l'inconscient" (45).

Judith Herman places the evolution of trauma theory, including its overlap with the
feminist movement, within a historical context. “Three times over the past century, a particular
form of psychological trauma has surfaced into public consciousness. Each time, the
investigation of that trauma has flourished in affiliation with a political movement” (Herman 9).
The republican, anticlerical movement of late nineteenth century France provided an
environment favorable to the study of hysteria, a psychological disorder of women. However,
women were not recognized as subjects but as “objects of study and humane care…” (16). The
study of combat neurosis, which began after the first world war and reached its highest point
after the Vietnam war, was associated with the collapse of a cult of war and the growth of an
anti-war movement (9). This predominant focus upon the study of combat victims contributed to
the development of knowledge about traumatic disorders (28). The feminist movement in
Western Europe and North America brought awareness of domestic violence and sexual abuse
into the public sphere (9). Women had been “silenced by fear and shame” (28). Now they began
to speak out. However, it was only after the efforts of combat veterans led to the legitimization
of the diagnosis, post-traumatic stress disorder, that this psychological syndrome was applied to victims of rape, domestic battery and incest (32).\textsuperscript{4}

The overlap of trauma theory and French feminism around the use of language is evident in their mutual stress upon the question of history—the importance of telling one’s story—as well as upon accessing the unconscious and articulating what is held in the body. *Ecriture féminine*, which is closer to poetry than to prose, is a means of reaching the unconscious. French feminism comes close to merging body and text: "*En corps*: plus que l'homme invité aux réussites sociales, à la sublimation, les femmes sont corps. Plus corps donc plus écriture" ("Le Rire de la Méduse” 57). An example of the intersection of French feminism and trauma theory around language occurs in Cixous’s autofictional work *Dedans* where the narrator equates her text with a scar. “J’aime la cicatrice, ce récit” (*Dedans* 26). According to Robson, the text as scar (the healed wound) in *Dedans* is the story of wounding and of healing (*Writing Wounds* 28). Trauma theory and feminism overlap in the work of scholars such as Clare Kahane who, through a feminist reading of Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après*, analyzes the use of the maternal metaphor in the representation of trauma (Kahane “Dark Mirrors”). Marianne Hirsch has developed a theory of feminist postmemory where she explores a gendered transmission of bodily memory from mother to daughter that focuses upon wounds that leave marks (the concentration camp number tattooed upon a mother’s arm, the brand burned beneath the mother’s breast in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*). According to Hirsch, there is a range between *rememory* (repetition and reenactment) exemplified in Morrison’s *Beloved*, and postmemory (“that works through indirection and multiple mediation” (Hirsch, *The Generation of

\textsuperscript{4}Laura Brown, a feminist therapist, advocated for the application of the diagnosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to events not previously recognized as traumatic (such as rape, incest and domestic abuse). See “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.”
Postmemory” 82-83). She addresses ways in which, through the mediation of art, the daughter can receive the memory of the mark of the trauma without violent self-wounding or repetition.

In *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), Michel Foucault includes a discussion of language as it existed during the Renaissance. As part of the sixteenth-century *episteme*, language was part of a system of similitudes, a semantic web of resemblances.⁵ “[T]he Renaissance studied language as it would any other natural object” (Gutting 16). Words were things to be deciphered by man (Foucault *Les Mots et les choses* 50). Modern thought, with its emphasis upon the analysis of meaning and signification, separated words and things (58-59). In Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), the narrator says, “[p]our les malades mentaux, les mots, de même que les objets vivent autant que les gens ou les animaux... Ils palpitent, ils s’évanouissent ou s’amplifient...Pour moi, à cette époque, un mot, isolé de la masse des autres mots se mettait à exister, devenait une chose importante, devenait peut-être même la chose la plus importante, qui m’habitait, me torturait, ne me quittait plus, reparaissait dans mes nuits et m’attendait à mon réveil“ (16). Cardinal’s text includes a psychoanalytic model wherein the narrator and her psychoanalyst use words as keys to decipher the unconscious. However, this excerpt, with its assertion that words can assume a palpable, living quality also recalls aspects of Foucault’s discussion of language as it existed during the Renaissance where words and things were perceived as being interwoven. Although Cardinal certainly does not use a system based upon Renaissance thought, the passage suggests that certain words assume power that goes beyond their role as signifiers. Finding the hidden meanings that key words hold for the narrators of *Les Mots pour le dire* and *Le Livre d’Emma* is a critical part of their odysseys.

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⁵ Foucault developed the notion of the *episteme*, “the system of concepts that defines knowledge for a given intellectual era.” See Gutting 9.
Chapter 1

Too Young to Understand: Saul Friedländer’s *Quand vient le souvenir* and Sarah Kofman’s *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*

In adulthood, Saul Friedländer and Sarah Kofman became outstanding scholars. Friedländer, who is distinguished professor emeritus of history at UCLA, is the author of many books on Nazi Germany and World War II. He is noted for his work on collective psychoses and repression and for developing a psychohistorical approach to the past in *L’anti-sémitisme nazi: histoire d’une psychose collective* (1971) and *History and Psychoanalysis* (1975) (Eakin 251). Kofman, a philosopher at the Sorbonne, produced a “vast interdisciplinary corpus” of "nearly thirty books and numerous articles on philosophical, psychoanalytic, literary, feminist, and Jewish subjects" (DeArmitt 1) including works about Socrates, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Freud and Derrida (Ender. “Interview avec Sarah Kofman” 13-20). Her tragic suicide was in 1994. In their autobiographical works—Friedländer’s *Quand vient le souvenir* (1978) and Kofman’s *Rue Ordener/rue Labat* (1994) these astute scholars take journeys back to traumatized childhoods where they were helpless and bewildered; they had to hide in order to survive in a world that they could not comprehend.

Judith Kestenberg notes, “The primary conflict besetting the hidden child’s life was the conscious or unconscious uncertainty whether one wanted to be a Jew or a Gentile” (“Hidden Children: Early Childhood and Latency” 31). The phenomenon of splitting is well documented in trauma theory. According to Judith Herman, childhood trauma such as chronic abuse can produce contradictory and split images of the self (Herman 106). As a result of trauma

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experienced in childhood, both Friedländer and Kofman experienced a conflict of identities—a split—a “twoness.” In both *Quand vient le souvenir* and *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, the child’s voice emerges in first-person narrative through the adult who is writing through memory so that the combination of adult’s and child’s voices records each of these journeys.

**Quand vient le souvenir**

At a major traumatic juncture in his childhood (final separation from his parents and the transformation from the Jewish child, Paul Friedländer to the Catholic child, Paul-Henri Ferland) Friedländer describes a complete change of identity that includes blocking out his past: “Les dix premières années de ma vie, les souvenirs de mon enfance, devaient disparaître, car il n’y avait pas de synthèse possible entre celui que j’avais été et celui que je devais être” (*Quand vient* 83). The use of the verb *devoir* in *devaient disparaître* and *devais être* establishes the necessity of separating rather than integrating past and present selves in order for the dependent child to survive. Yet, when referring to memories of the first ten years of his life, Friedländer chooses to use *disparaître*, not *détruire*. There are two beings, two êtres, joined by rhyme in this passage (*être and disparaître*). One of them inhabits the world as Paul-Henri Ferland; the other child is invisible. Later, as an independent and stronger adult, Friedländer becomes capable of searching for coalescence. “[u]n besoin de synthèse, de cohérence profonde qui désormais n’exclut plus rien” (117). Friedländer’s compelling narrative relates this quest for cohesion.

The text, which uses the twoness as part of the central structure, alternates between the adult living and writing in Israel in 1977 and the child and adolescent in Europe (1932-1948); it recognizes and contains disjunctions in time and identity. The adult’s present is recorded in a sequentially organized journal format that covers a period of roughly six months from June 5 to
December 27, 1977. Each entry is dated and thereby anchored in time. The child’s experience mainly consists of fragments that resist representation in a continuous narrative. Friedländer contains these pieces from the past within an approximately chronological structure organized by changes of name and location, and most important, by connection to or separation from his parents. He is with his parents as Pavel Friedländer in Prague. As Paul Friedländer in France, he is with his parents most of the time until the major traumatic break when he is permanently separated from them. He remains in France as Paul-Henri Ferland and resumes the name, Paul Friedländer as an adolescent. By creating this loosely linear structure for the child’s experiences, Friedländer mediates between unanchored fragments and the quest for a contiguous life narrative.

Sidra Ezrahi calls Friedländer’s text a bifurcated narrative and a *pas de deux* between selves. “Precisely because the child’s story is not suffused with the foreknowledge of apocalyptic or epic events, but is rather *juxtaposed* with the voice of the mature historian writing in 1978, the reader is invited to experience *When Memory Comes* as a *pas de deux* between the selves who inhabit the present in Israel and the past in occupied Europe” (Ezrahi 366). A *pas de deux* is a dance for two people; this partnership enables the dancers to take positions that are impossible to accomplish alone. In *Quand vient le souvenir*, the man and the boy take steps together across time and space in order to weave past and present together, to integrate fragmented pieces from a traumatic past into a narrative and to synthesize a fractured self.

Friedländer, who came from a secularized Jewish family, learns about his Jewish identity at school through exclusion from the larger group and through a story about death. When it was time for catechism instruction the small number of Jewish children were sent out of the classroom into the hallway where a rabbi tells them stories; the story about the sacrifice of Isaac puzzles him. The child does not understand the reasons for his uneasiness; instead he experiences
The adult narrator, who does understand, inserts the child’s experience within the larger historical context through commentary about world events that coincided with this time period. Pavel began school during unsettled times—just before the Munich Conference. War was imminent; Czechoslovakia would be sacrificed. The child sensed the atmosphere of mounting fear and anxiety in his home. In addition, Friedländer approaches the trauma through juxtaposition of the everyday and the extreme in the subsequent passage about the school director’s funeral.

Des choses que je ne comprenais guère furent dites et c’est alors que survint un événement anodin pour d’autres, mais qui me marqua profondément: le cercueil glissa sur d’invisibles rails, tandis que, sur la scène, la lumière baissa, le rideau tomba lentement et qu’une musique funèbre emplit la salle.

Cette étrange cérémonie aurait déjà suffi à me glacer de terreur; mais, soit pour répondre à une question de ma part, soit par volonté de démystification, ma mère ou Vlasta m’expliquèrent que le corps du directeur allait être incinéré. On me dit que le cercueil, en métal, devait entrer dans un four où il serait chauffé à blanc, ce qui réduirait le cadavre en cendres. Que l’explication ait été exacte ou non, j’entendis, pour la première fois, parler d’un four crématoire et j’en fus bouleversé. (23)

The last sentence, chilling in its simplicity, conveys interplay between levels of unresolved incomprehension. Friedländer suggests, rather than states, the massive horrors that lie ahead. The child and the adult do not understand for different reasons. The child is not developmentally ready to understand death. He reacts to an ordinary death and cremation ceremony (un

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7 Friedländer links the sacrifice of Isaac with the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia by providing information about the impending invasion just after he discusses the story of Isaac 35-36.
The family immigrates to France and Pavel assumes another name, Paul. His parents temporarily place him in a home for Jewish children at Montmorency. There, he undergoes a brutal, terrifying and utterly disorienting experience because of others’ perception of his identity. Because of his secular upbringing, Paul appears to be a non-Jew to the orthodox Jewish boys at this institution. The boys tie him to a tree and beat him because they think he is a Gentile. At the first school, Gentiles defined him as Jewish; at this one, Jews define him as Gentile. Friedländer negotiates between the man and the traumatized child, first by presenting the immediacy of what the child understood himself to be at that moment—“un non-juif, un ‘goy’” and then by inserting the incident within its historical context: “Et voilà que les petits juifs de Montmorency allaient se venger de tout ce que les goyim leur avaient fait subir—qu’ils en aient fait l’expérience direct ou non—à eux, à leurs familles et au people juif tout entier” (50). The boys, who have been marked as “other” by the larger society, redefine another child as “other” and act out their anger upon him. This allows them to be powerful perpetrators instead of helpless, homeless victims. From the perspective of time and distance the adult sees other boys’ point of view and he provides the explanation. However, explanation does not necessarily lead to synthesis. The next passage brings the frozen quality of the event into focus.

Je fus attaché à un arbre et battu. Que de cauchemars se pressent et se regroupent autour de cet instant. Je revois l’arbre et, me croira-t-on, je me souviens de l’écorce, je sens sa rugosité verdâtre. Plus loin, le bâtiment spacieux où nous étions logés, entouré d’une longue terrasse. Journée ensoleillée, massifs de fleurs, pelouses tondues. Battu par des enfants juifs parce qu’ils me croyaient autre.
Ainsi, je n’appartenais plus à rien. À ce moment-là, je ne savais qu’une chose: mes parents étaient loin et les enfants me terrifiaient. Je hurlais de peur, je tapais la tête contre le tronc. (50-51)

The interplay between the eloquent adult writer and the inarticulate child in this passage illustrates some of the tensions in Friedländer’s narrative. The adult writer tries to place the event in the past by using past tenses to describe the child’s situation and feelings. The passive form, je fus attaché conveys the sense of overwhelming helplessness that is associated with traumatic situations. He was acted upon; his boundaries were violated; he had no choice. Yet the adult narrator expresses the child’s terror and feelings of abandonment in the imperfect tense which both places his feelings in the past and suggests an ongoing state. Although in retrospect, the adult can describe the event with words, at the time of the event the child could only speak through his body with howling and head banging. In addition, Friedländer presents a split in himself as an adult. While the adult writer can consciously place the event in the past through language, he acknowledges that the unintegrated trauma persists despite the adult’s capacity to understand; it returns in nightmares over which the adult has no control. When Friedländer describes the dreams, he switches from the past to the present tense. Furthermore, the nightmare contains a field memory wherein the rememberer’s perspective is from inside the scene rather than a processed, revised observer memory where the rememberer’s perspective is from outside the scene; he sees the child that he was in the scene. Friedländer sees the building and the terrace from the viewpoint of one who is tied to the tree. The sensory images, particularly the references to the sense of touch, suggest that remnants of the unprocessed trauma are retained in his body.

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8 For a discussion of field and observer memories see Ender, Architexts 81-85.
Eventually, Friedländer’s parents take him back and the family moves to Néris where they remain together for about two years. The next major traumatic incident that Friedländer relates is the final separation from his parents. Their situation had become untenable and deportation seemed imminent. Desperate to save their child, the Friedländer family place him in a Catholic boarding school where he assumes another name and another religion. The *pas de deux* in the scenes that follow is between the adult and an older child (now ten-years-old) who is making transitions in identity and living situations (from home to institution). All of this is difficult, but the most wrenching pain is separation from his parents. He feels this in his body—“c’était un besoin physique en quelque sorte que rien ne pouvait entraver” (88). He *must* be with them. He knows that his parents are temporarily staying at the hospital in Néris (his father was ill) before their planned escape to Switzerland.9

The last meeting with his parents is traumatic. Yet portions of its representation in the text do not have the frozen quality of the memory from the scene at the previous school. They have been more successfully placed in time and processed into language. One reason for this is that there are not the elements of surprise and complete helplessness that existed in the first situation. In addition, the boy who is older and more capable of acting independently, plans and carries out his escape from the school. Once outside the school grounds, he asks directions to the hospital. The series of events leading to the scene at the hospital are clear, sequential and include details that fix his venture in space.

The description of the poignant scene with his parents in the hospital room is a more problematical mix of processed and unprocessed memories. The adult writer was able to clearly relate much of what transpired at a later time because, at the time of this rupture, the parents

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9 Their efforts to survive were unsuccessful. The Swiss authorities turned Jan and Elli Friedländer over to the French police. They were sent to a transit camp and later deported to Auschwitz.
listened to their young son. The child was allowed to express his desire to remain with his parents and, although they refused to take him with them, they witnessed his pain. He encounters his mother, sits on her lap and cries. Then they go out on the adjoining balcony. Friedländer uses details from the scene on the balcony as metaphors for the nurturing mother. First he uses objects that are present.

La chambre donnait sur un balcon qui courait tout au long de l’étage et permettait de communiquer avec les chambres voisines. C’est par là que mon père vint nous rejoindre.

Des pots de géraniums, fixés aux bords de la balustrade, contrastaient de leurs taches rouges avec la blancheur générale. A Néris aussi nous avions des géraniums sur le bord de la fenêtre; ma mère et moi en étions responsables. Nous les arrosions avec amour et avec précaution. Avec l’hiver, il fallut faire attention aux gelées, mais dès que la première fleur s’ouvrit, quelle joie! (89)

Friedländer uses the geraniums as a link to his life before the traumatic break. This passage presents similarities to home where he, like the flower, can be protected and grow up under his mother’s care. Then he shifts to objects that are absent.

Sur le balcon de l’hôpital, il y avait des chaises longues et une petite table, blanche elle aussi, sur laquelle il n’y avait que du papier à lettres, un encr eur et un stylo: pas de pelotes de laine, ni d’aiguilles à tricoter. A Néris pourtant, le soir ma mère tricotait. Elle m’avait fait un pull-over, un cache-nez et des moufles, car –l’ai-je déjà dit? – en hiver il faisait très froid et les enfants avaient tous des engelures….en tout cas le pull-over qu’elle me tricota – et que j’emportai à Montluçon—était blanc, avec des bandes transversales rouges; les moufles aussi
avaient des bandes de couleur. Ma mère voulait que tout fût beau. (89-90 emphasis added)

As his mother protected the geraniums from frost, she protected her son and provided him with warmth. The absence of wool and the knitting needles presages abandonment and the void to come. The world in which Paul was nurtured and cherished is unraveling. The last sweater that his mother knit for him will remain with him at Montluçon but his mother will be gone forever. The objects, linked to the mother, carry profound loss.

His father joins them and both parents try to reassure him (and themselves) that the war will end soon and they will all be reunited. Until this point Friedländer has used elements that place the scene in the past such as sequencing, details from the environment, and past tenses including the simple past and the imperfect. Then the clarity of the scene shifts with his father’s kiss and the knowledge that it brings. The tender gesture from this reserved man means that this is no ordinary parting. As Cathy Caruth has demonstrated, because of its overwhelming nature, the traumatic event is not fully experienced. This is why it is so difficult to remember it consciously and to place it in the past. Paul reacts with his body; he clings to the bars of the bed, but remembers little else. Amnesia replaces coherence: “ce que je sentis a sombré dans l’oubli et, de tout ce déchirement, il ne reste qu’une vignette de ma mémoire, l’image d’un enfant descendant la rue de la Garde, dans le sens inverse à celui que, peu avant, il avait pris, sous une paisible lumière d’automne, entre deux religieuses vêtues de noir” (91). Friedländer approaches the traumatic moment of being torn away (déchirement) by moving from the past tense (je sentis) to the adult’s present (il ne reste) and then to the child’s continuous present via utilization of the present participle (descendant) which freezes the moment; it never passes. Unlike the scene where Paul is beaten at the school (a field memory), this is an observer memory; it has been
revised. Friedländer’s perspective is from outside of the scene. It is also a screen memory that veils the overwhelming and unassimilated event that he cannot consciously remember—being torn away from his parents. Instead, it allows for a torn self: the helpless, banished child in the scene and the rememberer viewing himself from a safer distance.

In the aftermath Paul falls apart. Back at the school he turns his rage about abandonment inward and exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including severe depression and a suicide attempt. During a feverish delirium he has a panic-stricken dream where he is searching for his mother. He sees her, runs towards her and she puts her cool hands on his face. However, when he awakens he finds that the hand soothing his forehead is not his mother’s hand, but that of Mme Chancel, who worked at St. Béranger and had been keeping vigil at his sickbed. In order to survive, he must accept the mothering that is available to him. Caretakers at the school, such as Mme Chancel, sometimes play this role but soon he will turn, mostly, to his new religion and particularly to the Virgin Mary for comfort. “Paul Friedländer avait disparu; Paul-Henri Ferland était un autre” (125). Out of necessity he must block out part of himself and part of his history. He embraces his new life at St. Béranger and decides that he will become a priest.

Another major split occurs during early adolescence. According to Martha Wolfenstein, individuals are not ready for the work of mourning until they have passed through adolescence. (Wolfenstein, “The Image of the Lost Parent” 433). This is the case for twelve-year-old Paul-Henri Ferland. He understands what death is. Yet his ability to accept his parents’ death and to mourn for them is limited. When the war ends he believes that his parents will return. This is partly because there was inconclusive information from the Red Cross and partly because he is unable to consider the possibility of his parents’ deaths. Mme Fraenkel, a family friend, visits him and hints at the possibility of their deaths (“Si par exemple tes parents ne revenaient pas, tu
voudrais rester ici?” 132). He expresses no shock, no grief because he cannot consciously assimilate this knowledge. Instead, he later exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including sleeplessness, cold sweats and panic attacks (usually when he was alone). One panic attack, which occurs while he is serving mass, leads to a dissociative state: “Nous étions trois en ce moment-là: celui qui avait peur, celui qui le regardait et celui qui servait la messe, comme une machine” (137). The splitting was a coping mechanism that allowed part of him to function while the split-off part contained the panic.

Not long afterwards, Mme Fraenkel pays another visit. Still clinging to the illusion of his parents’ survival, he asks her for news about them. Her response suggests that there is a gap in Friedländer’s memory—that someone may have previously provided him with more direct information than what is recorded in his text. “Alors elle me fixa et articula très lentement et très distinctement: ‘Mon pauvre Paul, tu ne comprends donc pas que tes parents sont morts?’” (137). If he had received this information before, her response suggests that Paul was unable to assimilate the information. Instead the knowledge that he was not ready to acknowledge manifested itself through the symptoms previously described--anxiety, panic attacks, dissociation as well as preoccupation with his own death. Even after Mme Fraenkel’s direct statement, Friedlander does not relate a reaction of sadness. Instead, he ends the section with Mme Fraenkel’s question, “tu ne comprends donc pas que tes parents sont morts?” Evidently, he does not understand.

The text conveys an inability to mourn not so much by what Friedländer says, but by what he does not say. There is no mention of a grieving process at this point. Rather, the next section that is presented from the adolescent’s point of view begins with a focus upon school ("[j]’entrai en troisième” 138) and plans for the future. “Allais-je donc devenir ‘jèse’, moi aussi?
Pourrais-je accéder, moi aussi, à cette élite? C’est bien ce que je voulais, ce matin-là et j’allais en parler au père L. Trois ans encore, puis le noviciat. La voie était tracée: quelle exaltation!” (140).

A case related by Wolfenstein elucidates this passage. It concerns a fifteen-year-old girl whose mother had recently died. Soon after her mother’s death the girl wrote a humorous composition about how she had gotten through her first year of high school with only minor problems. It contained no reference to her mother’s death. According to Wolfenstein, the girl’s case illustrates a denial of the finality of loss and defends against related affects (“How is Mourning Possible?” 97-101). Similarly, Paul-Henri does not mention his parents’ deaths nor does he display feelings of loss and sadness. Instead he focuses upon his enthusiastic anticipation of preparing to become a Jesuit priest.

The act of mourning in this part of the pas de deux comes from the adult who takes the steps that were impossible for the adolescent at the time of the event. Friedländer negotiates the gap in time and affect by inserting a self-reflexive segment between these two sections (the one that ends with Mme Fraenkel’s message to the twelve-year-old (137) and the one that begins, “[j]’entrai en troisième” 138). The insert (dated 4 octobre 1977) is written from the adult’s point of view.

Écrire donc, il le faut. Écrire c’est retracer les contours du passé d’un trait moins éphémère peut-être que le reste, c’est tout de même conserver une présence, c’est pouvoir raconter également qu’il y eut un enfant qui vit sombrer un monde et en renaitre un autre aussi.

L’école est finie. Voici Michal [son fils], en coup de vent…Sur la plus vieille des trois photographies que je garde de ma mère, on la voit petite fille: les mêmes traits, le même sourire. (138)
Friedländer engages in the work of mourning by writing in the present (1977) about the past. In this passage, he mourns for his parents and for the child that he was. He distances himself from that child by referring to him in the third person. Furthermore, his use of the past perfect tense places the boy in a time that is gone. In Wolfenstein’s reading of Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* she says, “[t]he lost object is thus gradually decathected, [let go] by a process of remembering and reality testing, separating memory from hope. The mourner convinces himself of the irrevocable pastness of what he remembers: this will not come again, and this will not come again” (“How is Mourning Possible?” 93). His mother’s smile in the old photograph is the punctum that both wounds him and helps him to separate memory from hope. He recalls his mother’s smile twice in *Quand vient le souvenir*; both times were from the world before the catastrophe. Once was when he was a little boy in Czechoslovakia; she had returned, radiant from skiing. The other was the photo from his mother’s childhood. Both are irrevocably past. Furthermore, by mentioning his son in the same sentence, Friedländer attempts to integrate the photograph into the natural flow of generations. Yet, the intervening ellipses convey a gap. Genocide disrupts the continuity of generations. It not only cuts off the possibility of intergenerational relationships, but also knowledge that would normally be passed along (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 168). Like many children of Holocaust survivors, Michal has never known his grandparents. Friedlander’s use of the phrase, “sombrer un monde,” underscores the sense of eradication. Michal cannot hear his grandmother’s stories nor feel her love.

An additional split occurs in conjunction with death and identity when Paul-Henri travels to another school in order to discuss his plans for the future with a Jesuit priest who teaches there. During their conference Father L clarifies some of the cloudy information the boy had received
by telling him about Auschwitz; furthermore he imparts some information about Jewish history.
The priest’s mentoring is a gift that enables Friedländer to begin to grasp and to contextualize
fragments from his past: “j’avais l’impression que les pièces essentielles d’un puzzle jusqu’alors
incohérent tombaient en place” (141). Now he recognizes that he is both Jewish and Catholic—a
person divided. However, this division is qualitatively different from the fractured self he
experienced while serving mass. This split is not manifested through the body; instead, it is
governed by conscious thought. For example, when the boy returns to St. Béranger he remains a
devout Catholic, but he makes the decision to relinquish his “borrowed” name, Paul-Henri
Ferland and asks to be called Paul Friedländer. Paradoxically, this division is cohesive because
this act of naming, of self-identification, is an important step towards recognizing the part of
himself that had to disappear in order to survive. Eventually, Paul decides to relinquish his path
towards the priesthood, leaves St. Béranger and ventures out into the world.

**Objects**

Two objects play significant roles in Friedländer’s endeavor to put the pieces of the
puzzle together: his father’s wristwatch and his father’s copy of Gustav Meyrink’s novel, *The
Golem*. They have some features of testimonial objects as defined by Marianne Hirsch and Leo
Spitzer.\(^\text{10}\) For example, the watch carries testimony from one generation to another. Jan
Friedländer gave the watch to a doctor who planned to escape and asked him to deliver it to his
child. The doctor jumped from the train and, although his legs were amputated on the tracks, he
survived. The watch, a final bequest from father to son, delivers the news about his parents’ final
journey as well as the doctor’s harrowing story.

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\(^\text{10}\) See “The Tile Stove” (141-150) and “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender and Transmission.”
The testimonial objects discussed by Hirsch and Spitzer belonged to the lives of members of the first generation (adults who survived or perished in the Shoah). These objects are part of testimony (direct or indirect) delivered from the first generation to the second generation (children of survivors who were born after the war). They provide points of intersection between memory and postmemory. In *Quand vient le souvenir*, the objects pass from the first generation to the 1.5 generation. In Friedländer’s case, these objects not only belonged to his father’s past, but to his own past as well. His father winding the watch was part of a reassuring ritual from childhood that represents a time when the paternal figure still had some control. He winds the watch on a Sunday morning and the day begins. His father consults his watch when they walk in the woods together looking for mushrooms. The watch marks shared experiences with his father from the time before the catastrophe when the father’s knowledge and power helped to define the child’s world. The father knows just where to find elusive *chanterelles*. The watch signals the father’s loss of control, too. A weakened father looked at it repeatedly while pacing back and forth in the hospital. The secure world of childhood was crumbling during this last encounter with his parents. The watch, then, marks the trauma of final abandonment. Finally, the watch points to a double absence. Like a gravestone, it marks the death of his parents. When it is stolen, that tangibility is gone too.

The objects provide points of intersection between the adult historian and his past selves. Friedländer groups all of the incidents concerning the watch in the same part of the text (187-188). The missing watch, then, serves as an organizing element that brings together selves from before, during and after the major traumatic split. The watch, a marker of time, underscores the structure of the text, which is a back and forth between past and present. This placement of

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11 During the first, more extensive description of the hospital scene that appears earlier in the text, Friedländer does not mention the watch.
incidents about the watch in the closing pages of *Quand vient le souvenir* indicates both an ending and a beginning. Robbed from the adolescent, the watch symbolizes his stolen childhood, a common dilemma for child survivors. In addition it points to his future as the historian who, someday, will make a personal quest in search of stolen time.

Friedländer says that scraps of the legend of the golem nourished his imagination as a child (“a nourri, par bribes, mon imagination d’enfant” 26). He and his father used to leaf through his father’s copy of Gustav Meyrink’s *The Golem* which included illustrations by the engraver, Hugo Steiner-Prag. As a child, Friedländer was acquainted with the work by Meyrink. However, the adult author of *Quand vient le souvenir* is also familiar with other versions of the golem legend. His favorite corresponds to a version set in Prague where the rabbi creates a golem (a very strong creature made from clay who looks like a man) to protect the Jewish community. When the community is no longer in danger, the rabbi destroys the golem by turning it back into clay. But, Friedländer continues, the golem never really disappeared; it returns from time to time throughout the centuries (*Quand vient* 26-27). According to Meyrink’s novel, the golem returns every thirty-three years. Aspects of golem legends are reflected in the structure of *Quand vient le souvenir*. Friedländer’s first dated journal entry is June 5, 1977 – exactly thirty-three years after American forces landed in Normandy (D-day was June 6, 1944). Themes from of Meyrink’s novel seep into *Quand vient le souvenir*. Meyrink’s text refers to legends about the golem of Prague and includes appearances of the golem. However, its main character is not the golem. It is, rather, the story of a man who accidentally picks up another man’s hat, wears it, and then, through a dream, is transported several decades back in time; the transported man enters the life of Athanasius Pernath (the owner of the hat) and acquires his identity. Pernath has lost the

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12 The story of the golem of Prague dates back to the 16th century. Goldsmith states that “[t]he Golem looked like an ordinary human being and was unable to speak. His knowledge and intelligence were confined to being able to understand and obey instructions which had to be very precise and elementary” 4.
memory of his past, especially memories of his childhood. He had become insane as a result of some unspecified trauma and then treated with hypnosis which induced the cure of forgetfulness. He begins life anew in the outside world where he can function in a limited way. For example, he can earn his living as a cutter of stones (he carves cameos), but he does not remember how or where he learned his trade.

“Who am I?”—a main theme in *Quand vient le souvenir*--is a central question in *The Golem*. Pernath becomes able to answer that question by taking a subterranean journey through dark and treacherous passageways. He finds a trap door and enters a dusty room that has one barred window and no doorway. It is the legendary room where the golem slept. The golem’s clothes from the sixteenth century lie in a pile on the floor. Pernath sees his double emerge from a tarot card that lies on the floor. “Actually it was crouching in the corner over there--*and looking at me with my own face!*” (Meyrink, *The Golem* 103). Goldsmith argues that Pernath can find his true identity through an intense psychological encounter with his alter ego (96). I would add that the scene about that encounter in the golem’s room enacts the phrases from *The Golem* from which Friedländer derives his title—“*quand vient la connaissance, le souvenir vient aussi, progressivement. Connaissance et souvenir sont une seule et même chose*” (*Quand vient* 28).

I fixed my gaze firmly upon him, and all his efforts to dissolve into the light of early morning that began to filter through the window to his aid came to nothing.

With my look I held him as with a vice. Step by step I wrestled with him for my life--that life which all the more was mine because it no longer belonged to me. (103)

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13 The passage about knowledge and memory occurs on page 72 of *The Golem* and not in conjunction with this scene about Pernath’s encounter with his double.
In this scene, looking becomes synonymous with knowing. The passage stresses the difficulty of facing a split-off part of the psyche through a vocabulary of confrontation. Once Pernath acknowledges the split-off part (he grasps it firmly), he can go through the painstaking (step by step) process of knowing it with his conscious mind. Then the trauma no longer overwhelms him (it shrinks in size). He can integrate it and own it (he picks up the pack of cards and puts it in his pocket). When he emerges from the room that is cut off from the outside world, he gradually recovers his memory. The process of integration which Pernath undergoes adumbrates Friedländer’s personal quest for synthesis --“[u]n besoin de synthèse, de cohérence profond qui désormais n’exclut plus rien” (Quand vient 117).

Two of the illustrations by Steiner-Prag from Der Golem are reproduced here. The first shows the golem (in the foreground) in the streets of the old Jewish quarter in Prague. This engraving conveys an atmosphere of fear and entrapment via the terrified facial expressions and body postures of the people who inhabit the narrow streets. In addition, the building that includes the tunnel looks like a monster disgorging people from its innards. The second engraving shows Pernath descending the staircase during his underground journey. The shape of his arm, which resembles the curve of the archway, repeats the tunnel motif, thus emphasizing the atmosphere of enclosure. The diminishing light and the broken stairs before him symbolize the unknown dangers that lie ahead.
Lange stand ich so und sah ihret Herrin, die ihrer leise, ganz leise zu wandern begann, denn sie zögerte noch. Und doch war das Tränenströmen durch die Wälder noch mit deutlich an meinen Ohren hörbar.

Ich brachte ihn kein Zweifel, wieder ging die ein Weg. Und die Räucher der Vögel erreichten, bis ihre Stille sich fühlte.


Nach ein paar Minuten, das war ich natürlich es, und dann war auch der Grund, der herrschte, gezwungene Stille, die ich schon berührt war und Minuten mit langsamen Schritten noch zurück in den Regen

Also stand ich, das war die Zeit gedreht, von der wegende Exekulat in der Nacht, als in einem anderen Land, genau so wie ich und doch nur

Ich machte und kürzest:

Ruhe.


Dann erwachte ich. Die erste Schreibblätter beflügten auf dem Stieg, die ganz neuen Worte folgten, ging nun mit ihren Metern wie freundlich.

So war es in der Stadt, ich ein Lebenstanzes Einzel Teil, das unter meinen Stirnfeldern auf dem
Fig. 2. engraving by Hugo Steiner-Prag reproduced in Gustav Meyrink’s *Der Golem*.

Friedländer alludes to the first Steiner-Prag engraving via an implied contrast to Jerusalem. In a journal entry dated November 12, 1977, he describes some evenings in Jerusalem when fog creates a mysterious atmosphere. He reflects, “[i]l n’y a pas, ici, de Golem qui parcourt les ruelles sombres” (*Quand vient* 154). Jerusalem is different from Prague, the city of Friedländer’s origins. While Friedländer was asleep on a boat en route to Israel in 1948, his father’s wristwatch was stolen from him. At that time, Friedländer, the adolescent, saw this as a sign that the past was gone and that there must be a new beginning (*recommencement*) for him. Like Pernath, who starts over in another place with hypnosis-induced amnesia, Friedländer tries
to put the past behind him and focus completely upon a new life in another place. However the
dark *ruelles* of his childhood trauma persist and eventually he must walk them.

Encounters with trauma occur belatedly and in another place (Caruth, “Introduction.”
*Trauma: Explorations* 8) and sometimes through the witnessing of another’s revisiting of trauma
(Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 25-56). Friedländer begins to make his own journey back after
working with institutionalized children in Sweden in 1957. His description of the experience
recalls elements of Meyrink’s *The Golem*. Although Meyrink’s golem mutters a few words, the
legendary golem of Prague was mute and had a limited ability to understand (Goldsmith 4). Like
the golem, these inarticulate children cannot communicate adequately through language. They
occupy a place that is similar to the golem’s room (“un monde intérieur fermé pour toujours”
(*Quand vient* 106).

Friedländer comes close to accessing one of those interior worlds when he takes Arne, an
adolescent, for his daily walk. The boy walks ahead of him, turns a corner and is surrounded by
village schoolboys who imitate his strange gesticulations. He runs away; they pursue him and
continue to taunt him. When Friedländer catches up with them, Arne is lying in the snow and
taking his anger out upon his own body. As Friedländer tries to calm him, the village boys
disperse. Arne tries to communicate: “il agrippa une de mes mains et leva le visage. Tout ce qui
était enfermé dans la tête d’Arne, tout ce qu’il ne devait jamais exprimer, toute sa souffrance
puissante mais muette était la sur le visage tordu, couvert de larmes, de morve, de bave et de
neige fondue. Arne coquilla les yeux, il voudrait tout me dire, mais comment dire? ‘Herr
Friedländer,’ cria-t-il, ‘Herr Friedländer!…’” (109). In this scene, Friedländer is a witness to the
boy’s inarticulate testimony. The incident resonates with an episode from Friedländer’s
childhood—when he was surrounded by boys at the Jewish home, tied to a tree and beaten. Like
Arne, he responded by taking out his anger on his own body. He banged his head against the trunk of a tree. He, too, was inarticulate; he howled. Friedländer could not enable Arne or any of the other children to exit from their closed off rooms but his role as their witness had a profound impact upon him: “je savais que cet étrange séjour suédois avait ouvert des portes qui ne se refermeraient plus” (110). Like Meyrink, Friedländer uses the doorway as a metaphor; like Pernath, he is ready to find a way into his own locked rooms.

Friedländer refers to his sojourn in Sweden as a year outside of time (107). Traumatic time differs from the normal flow of time. It is cut off from typical frames of reference, not subject to the same measures and sometimes frozen (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 141-177). Pernath spends an extensive, but unspecified period outside of time when he is locked inside a prison cell. His jailors do not reveal dates; one scrawny tree in the bleak yard indicates the change of seasons. The only clock, visible through the barred window, chimes off the hours, but has no hands.¹⁴ When Friedländer leaves Sweden, he re-enters real time. However the experience, which influences the path that he will take, leads both to his future as a scholar and to personal remembrance. He becomes a historian in order to grasp the meaning of a period of history and to make his own past coherent (148). Pernath fixes his gaze upon the split-off double that contains his past and he does not let it dissolve into the morning light. As a historian, Friedländer delves into archives. He fixes his historian’s gaze upon documents, brings them into public consciousness and does not let them dissipate into collective amnesia.

Goldsmith’s interpretation of the passage in *The Golem* from which Friedländer derives his title is “there is hope that Pernath’s memory will return. The implication is that true knowledge of self cannot be attained without awareness of one’s past” (Goldsmith 103). Both Pernath and Friedländer strive for awareness of the past. One of the ways in which Friedländer

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¹⁴ The clock without hands means that time has stopped for Pernath. See Goldsmith 112.
endeavors to piece the puzzle together is by using historical archives to help him in the process of constructing memory scenes from childhood. A printed document that Friedländer finds as an adult enables him to contextualize a mainly auditory fragment of memory from childhood where he was listening to the radio with his parents. The document is one of Hitler’s speeches that was broadcast over the radio on Sept. 26, 1938. A section of the speech (about refugees) links with a fragment of memory. “Ce que j’avais entendu, et ne pouvais plus oublier, c’était la répétition incantatoire du mot Tausend comme le halètement de quelque monstrueuse locomotive” (33). The child’s imagination expands and transforms the auditory input into a monster. The six-year-old perceived loud sounds, particularly the repetition of the word Tausend (thousand). The adult uses language to bring additional meaning to the six-year-old’s perception by defining the passage as alliterative and raucous. The historian was able to piece together bits of information (such as dates and the family’s location at the time of the broadcast) to deduce that this was the speech that he heard with his family. Through this process, an ungrounded fragment of memory becomes anchored in time.

Just before he relates the incident concerning the broadcast, Friedländer describes the mounting uncertainty felt by the family during that time period and he remembers his parents’ somber demeanors as they listened to the broadcast. The child, no doubt, sensed his parents’ anxiety. The frightened child may have felt and retained the image of the panting locomotive as part of a memory lodged in his body wherein the repeated sounds joined with the rhythm of a heightened heartbeat: tau send, tau send. The image of the locomotive as monster, recorded in the text as a simile, suggests additional layers of meaning that join the child’s perception with the historian’s (and the reader’s) hindsight. There will be other monstrous locomotives to come that will carry thousands to their deaths, including the one that swallowed up Friedländer’s parents.
During the time that Friedländer still lived with his parents in Néris, his teacher often showed him an old album of photographs of Prague that included a picture of the Jewish Town Hall with its two clocks (conventional and Hebraic). As M. Confesson turned the pages, he predicted, “Quelle belle ville’!... ‘Tu la reverras, sois-en sûr’” (70). The hands of the clocks on the old edifice in Prague move clockwise and counter-clockwise as Friedländer’s personal journey moves forward and backwards in time. Friedländer’s quest for synthesis cannot retrieve a stolen childhood but it does weave together fragments of personal memory and inscribes them in a continuum within collective history—a little boy’s heartbeat…the transports…the pulse of a father’s vanished timepiece.

Rue Ordener/rue Labat

One of these transports carried Sarah Kofman’s father, an orthodox rabbi, on the same route from France to Auschwitz where he was brutally murdered. Kofman was only seven years old when French police arrested her father on July 16, 1942 at the family’s apartment on Rue Ordener in Paris; she never saw him again. In her autobiographical narrative, Rue Ordener, rue Labat (1994) Kofman touches and articulates the ruptures and wounds from childhood.

As in Quand vient le souvenir, an object that belonged to the father plays an important role in Kofman’s text. The watch, Jan Friedländer’s final bequest to his son, escaped deportation; Rabbi Kofman’s fountain pen remained behind. Rue Ordener, rue Labat begins: « De lui, il me reste seulement le stylo……Je le possède toujours, rafistolé avec du scotch, il est devant mes yeux sur ma table de travail et il me contraint à écrire, écrire » (9). The watch and the pen attest

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15 The Jewish Town Hall in Prague was built in 1562. On the front of the building there is a huge clock with Hebrew numerals, which read from right to left. The hands of this clock go counter-clockwise. There is another, conventional, clock on a tower on the roof of the building. See Winkler 8.
16 An earlier work, Paroles suffoquées (1987) concerns her father’s deportation and death.
to forced separation from the beloved parent as well as to the presence of absence—integral themes in both books. The narrator of *Quand vient le souvenir* uses the watch to relate memories about his father as well as to underscore the structure of his text—a back and forth between time periods. Kofman places the pen at the beginning. It is the testimonial object that launches her narrative. The pen compels her to write about what she calls *ça*—a designation that conveys the difficulty—and perhaps the impossibility of finding words with which to express trauma.17

Chapter 2 opens with the day her father, the owner of the pen, disappeared: “*Le 16 juillet 1942, mon père savait qu’il allait être ramassé*” (11). The prominent position of the date anchors family tragedy within collective history. This was the first day of the Vel d’Hiv roundup (le rafle du Vélodrome d’Hiver). On July 16th and 17th 1942, French police arrested 13,152 Jews (Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: 1933-1945* 325). Kofman’s father, who had heard that there would be a roundup, spent the day warning members of the Jewish community. Then he returned home, reasoning that if he went into hiding, the police would take his family in his place. The juxtaposition of the date with the father’s (incomplete) knowledge engenders shock in the reader who, through hindsight, knows that the consequences of this decision will be deportation to Auschwitz and death. When the police arrive, Kofman brings the event to the forefront by shifting to the present tense. The mother protests with lies that could exempt her husband: she has a child under two years old; she is pregnant. Although the reader cannot entirely enter into the child’s experience, the feeling of shock engendered by the opening sentence touches the child’s dismay: her mother is actually lying about her little brother’s age and maybe she will have another baby brother! By bringing together the reader’s knowledge of reprehensible events (mass arrests of innocent people) and the child’s shame about her mother’s protective lie, the

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17 Kofman’s use of *ça* in this context resonates with the title of Marie Cardinal’s autobiographical novel, *Les Mots pour le dire*, which I will discuss in chapter 4.
deportation of thousands to the death camps and the possibility of the birth of one baby—the narrator creates conceptual dissonance. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for the reader to simultaneously hold onto both realities.

The policeman asks the mother to go with them to the police station to explain. When they leave, Kofman and her five siblings weep together in the street.

Ils partent.

Nous nous retrouvons tous les six dans la rue, serrés les uns contre les autres, sanglotant très fort et hurlant.

En lisant la première fois dans une tragédie grecque les lamentations bien connues « ô popoï, popoï, popoï » je ne puis m’empêcher de penser à cette scène de mon enfance où six enfants, abandonnés de leur père, purent seulement crier en suffoquant, et avec la certitude qu’ils ne le reverraient jamais plus : « ô papa, papa, papa. » (13-14)

Kofman crafts a passage that poignantly connects a little girl’s suffering with an ancient lament. The intertextual reference is not to a specific Greek tragedy; rather she gestures towards the general—human grief contained in a familiar genre. The chapter, which began by inscribing one family’s story within collective history ends with its placement in universal tragedy. These links between the particular and the universal help to draw the reader into the adult narrator’s representation of childhood trauma. In this passage, the adult is incapable of preventing the belated resurfacing of trauma (je ne puis pas m’empêcher). Furthermore, the child’s trauma and the adult’s moment of involuntary recall—which both took place at different points in the past—remain in the present tense even now as part of the retelling. This is trauma that cannot--will not--be placed in the past. The use of the continuous present with wordless cries

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18 *Popoï* is an exclamation of surprise, anger or pain. See Liddell and Scott 1448.
(sanglotant, hurlant) underscores the persistence of unarticulated trauma. In addition the use of the continuous present as well as a parallel construction links the trigger (en lisant…..« ô popoï, popoï, popoï ») with trauma held in the body as a feeling of suffocation (en suffoquant….« ô papa, papa, papa »).

The passage recalls an intertextual reference in *Quand vient le souvenir* where Friedländer remembers reading a document (as an adult) that contained one of Hitler’s speeches and connecting it to a terrifying childhood memory held in his body through sound and rhythm. In particular, the six-year-old internalized the repetition of the word *tausend* as the panting of a monstrous locomotive. It was the radio broadcast to which the frightened little boy listened with his anxious parents in 1938.

La scène elle-même m’est restée à l’esprit, mais je gardais par ailleurs le souvenir d’une répétition rauque, d’une sorte d’allitération que je n’arrivais pas à replacer dans son contexte, jusqu’au jour où, étudiant cette époque et lisant le discours prononcé par Hitler le 26 septembre de cette année-là, je tombai sur les phrases suivantes…. (*Quand vient le souvenir* 32-33)

A section of the speech, in German, follows. Like Kofman, Friedländer uses the continuous present tense (*lisant*) when he refers to the act of reading that evokes a traumatic event from the past. The choice of *tomber sur*, rather than a verb that reflects a deliberate action such as *trouver*, is consistent with the idea of trauma as an accident. Like Kofman, Friedländer places the family scene within the context of collective history; he too specifies the date. However, while the excerpt from *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* describes an involuntary reliving of the traumatic event, this passage from Friedländer’s text suggests some degree of revisiting and working through embodied trauma by putting it into language. Friedländer reproduces the section of the specific
speech that terrified him and resituates it in his text. He puts the internalized monster—including
the scary word *tausend*—into a context that the adult student of history can understand. The adult
uses this knowledge to address and ameliorate some of the child’s bewilderment and fear. His
frequent use of past tenses suggests that he is able to place the event in the past. In particular, the
phrase, *jusqu’au jour où* marks a point in personal history when, through piecing together part of
a puzzle, he incorporated the traumatic moment into a continuum. In contrast, in the passage
from *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*, embodied trauma remains in the present tense as a moment that
never passes; the narrator exposes the raw wound suspended in time.

**Hidden in plain sight**

Despite the father’s protective motive of self-sacrifice, Kofman and her siblings
experience the incident as a feeling of abandonment manifested through the body as suffocation
(“six enfants, abandonnés de leur père…en suffoquant”). Similarly, in *Quand vient le souvenir*,
Paul cannot accept the wrenching separation from his parents in spite of their reasons.¹⁹ Like
Kofman, his body holds the trauma; the boy loses memory and enters into an almost suicidal
depression. After Rabbi Kofman’s arrest, the roundups (*les rafles*) in Paris became more frequent.
Driven by a desire to protect her six children, Mme Kofman sought hiding places for them
outside of Paris. The feeling of abandonment persists for Sarah when she, her sister Rachel and
brother Aaron are placed in the countryside at Merville while their mother remained in Paris.
Like Friedländer, Sarah (now eight years old) and her siblings were hidden in plain sight under
false identities. Friedländer and Kofman were both too young to understand the necessity of

¹⁹ Friedländer’s parents were motivated by a desire to save their child (“…ils acceptaient un but premier, un
impératif essentiel: sauver leur enfant” *Quand vient* 85) when they placed their son in a Catholic school where he
assumed another identity and religion.
separation—or to bear it. Friedländer remembers an overwhelming need to reunite with his parents: “…il fallait que je rejoigne mes parents à n’importe quel prix!...c’était un besoin physique en quelque sorte que rien ne pouvait entraver” (Quand vient 88). Kofman, who spent much of her time crying, feared separation from her mother more than deportation. (“Le vrai danger: être séparée de ma mère 33). The young child’s intense need overrides reality.

Friedländer escapes from the Catholic school, finds his parents at the hospital in Néris, briefly visits with them and is then forced to return to the school the same day. Sarah is returned to her mother permanently because her behavior (refusal to eat pork) suggests her Jewish identity, thereby putting her and others in danger.

The chapter about Sarah’s stay at Merville emphasizes her disorientation and physical discomfort in addition to the pain of separation from her mother. There is, however, one place where she feels almost comfortable—at the country school she attends. This is the only place in the chapter where the child is portrayed as expressing herself mainly through language, rather than primarily through her body.

J’étais heureuse d’arriver en classe, dans la classe unique où enseignait madame Morin. En récitant Le Cochet, le Chat et le Souriceau avec un zozotement sans pareil, je déclenchai l’hilarité et la sympathie de mes camarades. L’école était le seul endroit où je me sentais « bien », où j’arrivais un peu à supporter la séparation d’avec ma mère. (30)

In this passage, Kofman mentions the title of a fable by La Fontaine, but says no more about it. The story, written in verse, is about a little mouse who, upon returning home, relates his adventure to his mother. He had ventured out into the barnyard all by himself where he saw two creatures. One was beautiful and sweet looking; he wanted to approach it but when the other
scary creature made loud noises and wild gestures the little mouse ran away. From the (more extensive) description in the fable, the reader realizes that the first creature is a cat and the second is a rooster that is trying to warn the little mouse to run away and hide. The mother mouse, who names the animals and explains the differences between them, delivers the fable’s moral, “Garde-toi, tant que tu vivras/ De juger les gens sur la mine” (Livre sixième, fable 5). This moral resonates with the key to anti-Semitism—judging based upon appearances. Furthermore, the reference to the fable by La Fontaine underscores the theme of being hidden in plain sight that pervades this chapter. It allows the little girl, who cannot divulge her true identity to her friends, to tell a story that bears some resemblance to her own. Furthermore, by identifying with the little mouse, the child can express her fears, identity confusion and desire for mastery in a situation where she felt helpless. Like the little mouse, Sarah was living in the country. While Sarah’s separation from her mother was enforced, the little mouse could voluntarily leave its mother and then return to her. Through her counterpart in the story, the child symbolically assumes some control in a situation where she had none. Like the spunky little girl who entertains her classmates in the one place where she can bear separation from her mother, the little mouse feels expansive (“comme un jeune Rat”) and brave—he ventures all by himself into another part of the barnyard. In normal circumstances children can take small risks, make mistakes and still be protected. However, these were not normal circumstances. The barnyard, like France during the Occupation, was a dangerous place where appearances were deceptive. A mistake about who to trust could be deadly. 20 Both the little mouse and Sarah are old enough to remember but too young to understand. As a result, they misconstrue the situation and make errors in judgment. 21 The outside world, like the cat, is attractive and the people who make her

20 See Rechtman: “These [hidden] children did not know what was safe and what was dangerous” 26.
21 See Rubin’s discussion about the mouse’s errors in judgment 33-34.
hide, like the rooster, thwart her desires. Sarah, who was in a safer place than Paris, perceives the real danger as being separated from her mother. She manages, by refusing to eat pork, to be reunited with her mother, but her manipulative move almost reveals her Jewish identity and puts her and others in danger. Like the mouse, she almost lets herself be seen. If the cat had seen the little mouse, he would have been devoured (deported) as Rabbi Kofman was earlier that year when he let himself be seen by the French policeman.22

The predator/prey relationship in the fable resonates with the imagery that Art Spiegelman develops in *Maus I* (1986) and *Maus II* (1992) where he portrays Jews as mice and Germans as cats. In addition, the reference to the fable provides jarring points of intersection between one child’s experience and the adult narrator’s (and the reader’s) hindsight about collective history. The mouse, eight-year-old Sarah’s counterpart, identifies in positive ways with rats. At the same time, the reader is aware of Nazi propaganda that equated Jews with rats as vermin. The intertextual reference implicitly juxtaposes a work of fiction recited with a child’s playful lisp with grim historical reality.

Sarah is returned to her mother and lives with her in the family’s apartment on Rue Ordener in Paris. When there are rumors of impending roundups, which have increased, they often hide temporarily with Christian neighbors and then return to their apartment. The final departure from Rue Ordener, the site that represents her family and her ties to Judaism, happens when a man comes to their door and warns them to leave immediately; they are on the list for tonight: “9 (?) février 43, 8 heures du soir. Nous sommes dans la cuisine et mangeons du bouillon de légumes. On frappe. Un homme entre : « Allez-vous planquer, vous et vos six enfants, vous êtes sur la liste pour ce soir. Et il file” (39). There is a sense of urgency in this passage which, like a traumatic moment, remains in the present tense. It recalls, through its

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22 Being devoured or swallowed up is a theme in *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*. 
similarity in situation and structure, her father’s arrest in chapter 2. However, while the earlier passage is specific about the date and the time, this one is unclear about the date. Her father was arrested during the shocking Vel d’Hiv roundup on July 16, 1942—a date inscribed in history books. In contrast, by February 1943, roundups had become more commonplace. This particular roundup, with its uncertain date, is just one of many. In the paragraph that follows, the narrator shifts to the past tense as the child recounts—not the terror of being hunted—but instead, pleasant memories of hiding in the homes of Christian neighbors—a purring cat that slept on her bed, breakfast shared, the gift of a book. These juxtaposed passages, presented from the child’s perspective, are placed within the context of a world where comfort and peril share the same space. This time they take shelter with a woman, who often hid them—la dame de la rue Labat.

The next day, they sneak into their sealed and vandalized apartment to quickly gather a few items, never to return. The rupture from what was once home is definitive.

**Metamorphosis**

Sarah and her mother return to la dame de la rue Labat who soon tells Sarah to call her mémé (which means grandma); they will remain with her for the duration of the war. The shift from life in her mother’s orthodox Jewish home to mémé’s home ushers in significant changes. As Suleiman has demonstrated, Jewish children in hiding had to suppress their Jewish identities in order to survive at an age when identity was not yet fully formed. As hidden children, both Friedländer and Kofman undergo changes in identity. Friedländer experienced the final separation from his parents through his body as a severe, almost suicidal depression followed by illness. However, once he recovers, he accepts his new identity and embraces his new religion. In Friedländer’s case, his parents, who were not religious, gave their consent to his identity change
which included conversion to Catholicism. Therefore, the child’s acceptance of his new identity
did not constitute disobedience or disloyalty to his parents. Like Pernath, the protagonist of
Meyrink’s *The Golem*, whose past vanishes when he puts on another man’s hat, the child
suppresses his former self. “Paul Friedländer avait disparu: Paul-Henri Ferland était un autre”
(*Quand vient* 125). The necessity for metamorphosis was clear.

In contrast, the necessity for metamorphosis was not clear for Kofman as a child. Unlike
Friedländer, who had to pose as a Catholic child at St. Béranger, Kofman was hidden with her
mother who wanted her to remain Jewish. Mama and mémé compete for control. Eventually the
child must choose between them; this involves conflict, guilt and betrayal. The process takes
place gradually. Mémé begins by taking Sarah into her space (her apartment) and eventually
incorporates her into her life. Chapter XII, entitled “Métamorphose,” begins by describing the
layout of the apartment. At first Sarah is not torn between her mother’s world and mémé’s world.
She continues to accept her parents’ values; she eats kosher food that her mother prepares. Like
many hidden children, Sarah could not go to school. Instead, she spends most of her time in her
mother’s room where she reads children’s books. Significantly, the globe with which she plays is
located in her mother’s room; she still belongs to her mother’s world. Yet even while she
occupies her mother’s space, she ventures outward intellectually. The books she reads once
belonged to mémé’s son who is now married and lives elsewhere. Furthermore they are written
in French, which is not her mother’s language.

From this point until the end of the war, access to the outside, which attracts the child, is
through mémé. She enjoys accompanying mémé on her errands while pretending to be mémé’s
daughter. Mémé sews more attractive clothes for Sarah and restyles her hair. Furthermore, when
she initially told Sarah to call her mémé, she began to call the child Suzanne: “…cette femme qui
se fit désormais appelée par moi ‘mémé,’ tandis qu’elle me baptisait ‘Suzanne’ parce que c’était le prénom le plus voisin du sien (Claire) sur le calendrier » (47). While the name Suzanne is certainly useful in masking her Jewish identity when she goes outside with mémé, it is more than a disguise. Unlike Friedländer, whose official baptism enters him into the Catholic faith, Sarah’s unofficial baptism ushers her into a new interpersonal bond underscored by the conjunction tandis que. Furthermore, while Friedländer relinquishes his former name, Kofman becomes double; she is Sarah (her mother’s child) and Suzanne (mémé’s child). The most radical change was from her mother’s kosher food to mémé’s non-kosher food. “Mais, très vite mémé déclara que la nourriture de mon enfance était pernicieuse pour la santé; j’étais pâle, ‘lymphatique’, il fallait me changer de régime. C’est elle qui désormais allait s’occuper de moi” (48). This statement negates parental values, usurps the mother’s authority and eradicates her ability to nurture her child. It creates confusion for the child who experiences the conflict through her body; she eats mémé’s food but frequently vomits.23

A key object associated with Sarah’s metamorphosis is the medical dictionary that mémé keeps on the dining room table. “Le dictionnaire médical était toujours à portée de main, sur la table de la salle à manger. J’avais le droit de le feuilleter et regardai avec horreur les planches illustrant les diverses maladies et monstruosités, et fus particulièrement impressionnée par celles représentant les soeurs siamoises” (52). Mémé, who was often concerned about medical problems, particularly disorders of the digestive tract, places the dictionary on her table; the adult narrator resituates it in her text where it encapsulates aspects of childhood trauma. A dictionary defines and this dictionary’s placement on the site of major conflict—eating kosher versus non-

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23 Two studies about how the child’s divided loyalties are played out through eating disorders include Kathryn Robson’s Writing Wounds 133-155 and Tina Chanter’s “Eating Words: Antigone as Kofman’s Proper Name.”
kosher food—emphasizes the child’s uncertain sense of self-definition. The child’s fascination with the illustrations of conjoined twin sisters resonates with her emotional quandary.

A study by Wright (1997) found that conjoined twins tend to have oppositional personalities (cited in Quigley 79). While recorded data indicates that, in many cases, conjoined twins got along and more or less successfully negotiated their shared lives, there were some cases where they were not compatible and even came to blows. In *Those Extraordinary Twins*, Mark Twain writes about a pair of conjoined twins with oppositional natures. For example, they differ in their tolerance for types of food. “‘Indeed I owe everything to Luigi,’ said Angelo, affectionately. ‘But for him I could not have survived our boyhood days, when we were friendless and poor…We lived…on the coarse fare of unwilling charity, and for weeks and weeks together not a morsel of food passed my lips, for its character revolted me and I could not eat it. But for Luigi I should have died. He ate for us both’” (Clemens 134). The externally visible dilemma of conjoined twins is similar to young Sarah’s internal and invisible tug-of-war between cultures, religions, languages and loyalties. Sarah and Suzanne can neither split apart into separate individuals nor integrate into one. Like Luigi, Kofman ingests mémé’s cooking and this helps her to survive. However, unlike the twins in Twain’s novel, she cannot comfortably digest it. Her new identity is nourished by this food while her original identity rejects it. Suzanne eats; Sarah vomits.

In addition to the pairing of Sarah/Suzanne, the twin imagery introduced through the medical dictionary applies, in a different way, to the mama/mémé configuration. Because the city of Paris, itself, was occupied by a foreign body, many French citizens sacrificed or suppressed some of their own values in order to survive---either by collaborating with the Nazis or by becoming passive bystanders. Some, like mémé, risked her own life in order to hide Sarah and

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24 such as the Tocci brothers. See Smith 63-66.
her mother. Yet this brave and compassionate action led to other problems. Two very different women were compelled to co-habit one apartment. These two mother figures are not conjoined twins. However, they compete for control of one body—Sarah’s. In particular, the battle rages over the food that will enter Sarah’s digestive tract.

A key scene occurs at the end of this chapter. Just after Kofman refers to her fascination with the illustrations of Siamese twin sisters, she writes about her tonsillectomy, an operation that creates a wound at the entrance to her digestive tract.

Quand j’étais malade, à la différence de ma mère, mémé ne montrait pas le moindre affolement: après avoir été endormie avec un ballon de chloroforme, je me réveille sur le lit du dispensaire où l’on m’avait opérée des amygdales; les deux femmes sont à mon chevet. Je pleure et crie de douleur. Ma mère se met à parler très fort et à me plaindre en yiddish et veut alerter le médecin. Mémé, très calme et souriante dit: “Ce n’est rien, et tu vas pouvoir sucer beaucoup de glace!” Je cesse aussitôt de pleurer. Je ressens vaguement ce jour-là que je me détache de ma mère et m’attache de plus en plus à l’autre femme. (52-53)

When Sarah awakens from anesthesia, fearful and in pain, she sees two aspects of one scene. Her mother’s side of the scene is scary. Because Mme Kofman is fragile and becomes hysterical under these circumstances, she cannot help her daughter to feel safe. Instead she exacerbates the child’s anxiety by mirroring it. In addition, speaking loudly in Yiddish in a public clinic was dangerous; they could have been discovered and deported. In contrast, Mémé presents the image of the good mother through affect and language. Calm, smiling and reassuring, she helps the child to contain her fears and anxiety. She promises a treat that includes the soothing act of sucking.
Mémé’s remark, “ce n’est rien,” can be interpreted in several ways. On one level it can mean, it’s nothing. It’s alright to cut away a diseased appendage (your tonsils) from your body so that you can be healthy. Within the context of this chapter, her statement can also imply: (1) it’s necessary to cut away a weak appendage (the parasitic twin) so that the stronger child can survive. (2) It’s acceptable to detach from a dangerous mother in order to attach yourself to a mother who will protect you. Evidently, mémé’s side of the picture is more appealing.25

In the next chapter, “La fête des Mères,” (chapter XIII) the problem of attachment and detachment is developed further through the use of two objects. The child uses post cards to symbolically perform a surgical procedure of her own where she splits the mama/mémé configuration and consciously acknowledges her preference for mémé:

*Jour de la fête des Mères:* je prends l’argent de ma “tirelire”, et pars seule rue Custine acheter des cadeaux pour les deux femmes: une « résille » et un peigne, je crois; je prends aussi deux cartes postales. L’une d’elles représente un visage féminin tout sourire, l’autre, une femme assise, accompagnée d’un garçonnet debout. J’hésite un moment et je choisis pour mémé la première, celle des deux que je trouve la plus belle. J’ai honte et je me sens rougir dans la boutique. Mon choix vient bel et bien d’être fait, ma préférence déclarée. (55)

At the end of chapter XII, Sarah was ill and relatively passive. As she observed the scene before her that included both women, she had a vague feeling of detaching from her mother and attaching herself to mémé. In chapter XIII, she is stronger, more active and independent. She leaves the site of the maternal tug-of-war and goes by herself to Rue Custine, which is neither

25 My interpretation of this scene is consistent with Kelly Oliver’s observation that Mme Kofman undergoes a transformation into a dangerous mother during the course of Rue Ordener, rue Labat. At first, the real danger for Sarah is being separated from her mother. Then her mother, who cannot keep her safe from the Nazis, becomes the danger. So she rejects her mother and turns to mémé (Oliver185-186).
She buys two postcards; each one shows the picture of a different woman. Through this tangible act she symbolically cuts Mama and mémé apart. Unlike the scene at the clinic, they are no longer part of the same tableau. Furthermore, the card she chooses for mémé is a close-up shot while the one she selects for her mother was taken at a distance from the seated woman. Therefore her position as viewer underscores her feelings of attachment to mémé and of detachment from her mother.

Although Kofman says that her choice had been undeniably declared, there are undercurrents of ambiguity. The child in the picture is standing next to the seated woman. The picture seems to state visually what Mme Kofman later screams (in Yiddish), “Je suis ta mère! Je suis ta mère…tu m’appartiens!” (71). In addition, the picture reflects a previous message from a now absent voice. Her father’s last communication to the family was a postcard in which he directed his wife to take care of the baby. The little boy in the picture represents that baby, Sarah’s younger brother, Isaac. That postcard, which Kofman treasured, was lost. It resurfaces here as an echo of other layers of trauma.

Deux familles

The image of the father, whose absence hovers over the post card that Sarah gives to her mother, reemerges via her exposure to mémé’s family and references to photographs of her father’s family. In chapter XV, entitled “L’Haÿ-les-Roses,” she accompanies mémé to family dinners on Sundays.

À L’Haÿ, je découvris ce qu’on appelle une famille et l’esprit de famille. J’étais étonnée qu’il fût possible de rassembler plusieurs générations. Sauf en photos, je

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26 After the war, the two women fought for custody of Sarah. In the courtroom, Sarah sided with mémé and even testified against her mother. The tribunal awarded custody to mémé but Mme Kofman forcibly reclaimed her daughter.
n’avais jamais connu mes grands-mères, mes tantes, mes oncles ou mes cousins.

Tous (ou presque) étaient morts au ghetto de Varsovie (62).

The phrase, _ce qu’on appelle une famille_, jolts the reader who is compelled to come into contact with the mindset of a child who only knows what an extended family is through observation. By inserting the testimonial objects (the photographs) within this context, the narrator creates jarring points of intersection: (1) Familial. The present, living family to which she does not belong adjoins the absent, exterminated family to which she belongs, but never knew. This creates a feeling of limbo; the child belongs nowhere. (2) Spatial. The community of L’Haï-les-Roses is known for its lovely rose garden while the Warsaw ghetto conjures up grim images of mass starvation and suffering. (3) Historical. Through the reference to the photographs the narrator inserts the child’s family history within the context of collective history. The reader is aware of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and of the eradication of the ghetto that followed. The photographs, evidence of existence, are also testimony to atrocity.

The impact of this disjunction intensifies when, as an adult, Sarah views a specific photograph taken of her father as a young man.

_De cette période de la vie de mon père, antérieure à son mariage, il me reste une vieille photo marron tout abîmée qui me bouleverse encore aujourd’hui intensément et me serre le cœur. Il a les bras croisés et l’on voit nettement l’une de ses mains. Elle me paraît immense, comme une main de Kokoschka. Je le reconnais surtout à son sourire, au plissement de ses yeux derrière les lunettes. Il ne porte pas encore la barbe ni le chapeau. Il ne sait pas encore ce qui l’attend._ (64)

The chapter, which began with the child’s exposure to mémé’s family, ends by circling back to the initial wound—the loss of her father. The first passage introduced the absence of family
presented from the perspective of the child who is puzzled by the presence of extended family; she does not yet understand the magnitude of her loss. She never knew her extended family and she does not yet know that her father is dead. In contrast, the adult daughter knows. “Il ne sait pas encore ce qui l’attend.” As Marianne Hirsch has demonstrated, when the viewer, who has hindsight, looks at the family photo in its pre-Holocaust setting, she fills in the horrific images of what will happen/has happened (*Family Frames* 21). What the narrator recognizes as her father’s essence and what is also the *punctum* that wounds is his smile as well as his eyes.

The passage recalls Friedländer’s engagement with a photograph of his mother that was taken when she was a little girl. In both texts, the photographs are from a time that preceded the narrator’s birth; they bear witness across time and space. The smile is the *punctum* for him, too—a trait that his son has inherited. “L’école est finie. Voici Michal [son fils], en coup de vent…Sur la plus vieille des trois photographies que je garde de ma mère, on la voit petite fille: les mêmes traits, le même sourire” (*Quand vient* 138). Friedländer, too, reflects upon the photograph of his mother within the context of the lack of an intergenerational family. However, unlike Kofman, Friedländer knew members of his extended family when he was a little boy before he left Czechoslovakia with his parents. His text conveys a sense of loss but not of complete absence that Kofman transmits.

In both *Quand vient le souvenir* and *Rue Ordener/rue Labat*, the photograph helps the adult narrator to engage in the work of mourning—a task that the child was too young to undertake. Friedländer writes about his mother’s photograph in an entry dated 4 octobre 1977. Although Michal resembles his grandmother, Friedländer clearly places his son and himself in the present and his mother in the past. While he conveys deep sadness, he distances himself through the passage of time and by referring to the child that he was in the past tense and in the
third person—“...il y eut un enfant qui vit sombrer un monde et en renaître un autre aussi” (Quand vient 138). In contrast, Kofman’s thoughts upon viewing the photograph of her father are all in the present tense. Her present (aujourd’hui) merges with his present and future (il ne sait pas encore ce qui l’attend) and through the repetition of the word, encore, her wound that keeps recurring resonates with her father’s fate. There is a vocabulary of shock (bouleverser) and of intense grief (serre le cœur); the acute pain and the frozen moment never pass.

After the liberation of Paris, there is a trial where the two women compete for custody of Sarah. In the courtroom, Sarah sided with mémé and even testified against her mother. Sarah, who felt as though she had committed a crime, cried when her mother forcibly reclaimed her; however, inwardly she was secretly relieved. The dilemma of divided loyalties experienced by the child through her body (malaise, tightness in her stomach and fear) reemerges in the next chapter (XVIII “Les deux mères de Léonard”) via an intertextual reference to a work written by the adult scholar. She begins by telling the reader that she chose da Vinci’s London cartoon of “The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John the Baptist” for the cover of her first book, L’Enfance de l’Art. Her description of the work is brief: “Deux femmes, la Vierge et sainte Anne, étroitement accolées, se penchant avec un ‘bienheureux sourire’ sur l’Enfant Jésus qui joue avec saint Jean-Baptiste” (73). The rest of this short chapter consists of direct quotations from Freud’s analysis of this work by Leonardo.

The excerpt from L’Enfance de l’Art, now resituated within Rue Ordener, rue Labat, becomes part of a means of transmitting testimony. In her dissertation, Re-Centering the Mother, Federica K. Clementi comments upon Kofman’s use of Freud within her own texts. “Not only has Kofman searched into the texts of Freud to be able to find herself while discovering Freud, but she has pointed them to us in order to find her” (Clementi 217). In the excerpt from Freud
that Kofman includes in this chapter, Freud indicates that the drawing relates to Leonardo’s childhood because he had two mothers—his biological mother from whom he was torn away before the age of five and his stepmother. Freud notes, “sa jeune belle-mère, Albiera, supplantasans aucun doute sa mère dans son cœur” (Freud qtd in Kofman, Rue Ordener, rue Labat 74).

Clementi’s observation certainly applies here where the parallels between Kofman’s childhood and Freud’s observations about Leonardo’s childhood are obvious. The London cartoon to which Kofman refers in chapter XVIII was a draft for Leonardo’s final version—a painting which hangs in the Louvre (Clementi 224). According to Clementi, “[i]n a way, the story of one canvas cannot be told without the story of the other: each bears in pectore the void, the absence of the other” (228). I would add that visual imagery in these two works by Leonardo resonates with visual imagery from earlier parts of Rue Ordener, rue Labat. This provides points of intersection between the child who is too young to understand and the adult who does understand and who can articulate the trauma through the use of complex psychoanalytical concepts.27

An examination of both works by Leonardo in conjunction with chapter XVIII as well as with scenes from chapters XII and XIII reveals striking parallels. In chapter XII (“Métamorphose”) Sarah is fascinated with the illustrated plates (planches) of conjoined twin sisters in the medical dictionary (Rue Ordener, rue Labat 52). In Leonardo’s cartoon, St. Anne and the Virgin Mary look like conjoined twin sisters.28 Jesus sits upon the women’s laps (it is unclear whose lap is whose). The arms that wrap around his torso are disproportionately large—a feature that emphasizes the importance of the maternal hold. This aspect of the image mirrors

27 See also Kofman’s analysis of Leonardo’s work in The Childhood of Art and her use of psychoanalytical concepts. For example, she says that St. Anne’s smile is “a product of repression” (82) (82-84).
28 Clementi states, “[i]n the draft, the two women’s heads seem to belong to one body, to spring out of the same torso” 226. Furthermore, she observes that St. Anne (Mary’s mother and Jesus’ grandmother) and the Virgin Mary do not show any difference in age. Similarly, as Clementi points out, mémé [grandma] and Sarah’s mother were about the same age. (227)
Fig. 3. Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John the Baptist (‘The Burlington House Cartoon’) © The National Gallery, London. Purchased with a special grant and contributions from The Art Fund, The Pilgrim Trust, and through a public appeal organised by The Art Fund, 1962

Fig. 4. Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne. © RMN (Musée du Louvre) / René-Gabriel Ojéda
Sarah’s relationship to the mama/mémé combination prior to her tonsillectomy. Leonardo’s final version corresponds to a combination of images from the post cards that Sarah purchases in chapter XIII (“La fête des Mères”). In this painting, Jesus stands next to the seated women. This is similar to the configuration of the picture on the postcard that Sarah chose for her mother (a seated woman with a little boy standing beside her). The presence of the knife in the child’s hand recalls the symbolic cut that Sarah made to the dual mother figure (mama/mémé) when she bought separate picture postcards for each of them. Unlike the draft, the two women in Leonardo’s final painting no longer resemble conjoined twins. They are still close together but there is no suggestion of fused bodies. The child’s position in the painting in relation to St. Anne and the Virgin Mary is similar to Sarah’s position as viewer of the postcards. She chose a distance shot for her mother and a close-up shot of a smiling woman’s face for mémé. In Leonardo’s painting, St. Anne is much further away from the child than she was in the original draft. In contrast, Mary leans close to Jesus and they gaze intently into each other’s eyes.  

This visual stance echoes Sarah’s decision: “Mon choix vient bel et bien d’être fait, ma préférence déclarée” (Rue Ordener/rue Labat 55).

The landscape recalls a frightening incident associated with Sarah’s tonsillectomy. The night after the operation, the two women wrapped Sarah carefully in blankets and descended into the cellar in order to take shelter from an aerial bombardment. In the morning, they emerged to view a shattered cityscape: “Presque tous les immeubles avoisinants avaient été détruits, et la vue des pans de murs qui avaient seuls résisté me fit grande impression” (44). The remnants of free-standing walls that no longer offer shelter bear resemblance to the jagged, stony, and desolate mountainous terrain in the background of Leonardo’s painting which Clementi describes as a “wilderness, almost prehistoric in its inhabitable duress” (Clementi 228). The purpose of the

29 On the intense gazes that lock mother and child together, see Clementi 227.
bombing was to destroy an occupying foreign body. Like Sarah’s operation, which cut out an infected piece of her body, it leaves a wound. The proximity of both incidents links the child’s body and inner turmoil with the chaos of war.

Childhood trauma resurfaces through a combination of anecdote and visual imagery in the final chapter (XXIII) entitled “Hendaye - Moissac - impasse Langlois.” It begins at Hendaye where she spent nine months at a preventorium (an establishment where persons at risk of developing a disease, such as tuberculosis, receive preventive care and treatment). The rest of the chapter largely concerns her educational experiences in different settings. During much of this time she lived away from both her mother and mémé. She spent five years (from about age 11 to age 16) at Moissac, a place for children of deportees, where she attended school and renewed her connection with Judaism. The narrator relates an anecdote from her stay at Moissac: “Très sérieuse dans mon travail, j’aimais aussi plaisanter. À la fin des cours, il m’arrivait de poser des devinettes de style: ‘Quel est le comble pour un mathématicien? Vous ne savez pas? Manger des racines carrées à la table de Pythagore.’ Et toute la classe pouffait de rire” (95-96). The passage suggests that this was one of many riddles that the adolescent posed to her classmates. Yet this particular riddle, the one that the adult narrator places in her text, is significant because it operates on more than one level. On the surface, the play on words about la table de Pythagore (the multiplication table) amuses her classmates; yet it also resonates with buried childhood trauma. 30

The riddle refers to both philosophical and mathematical concepts associated with Pythagoras. The Pythagorean Table of Opposites consists of ten pairs: limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/many, right/left, male/female, rest/motion, straight/crooked, light/darkness, good/bad and

30 See also Ann Smock’s discussion of Kofman’s interest in wordplay, jokes and paradox in relation to Freud, Shakespeare, Nietzsche and others in “Sarah Kofman’s Wit” 33-45.
According to the Pythagorean Theorem, the sum of the squares of the sides adjoining the right angle in a right triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse (the side opposite the right angle). It can be stated as an equation that relates the lengths of the sides of the triangle, \( a^2 + b^2 = c^2 \).

Sarah, mama and mémé were in a triangular relationship. The visual imagery reflects some of the dynamics of this relationship. Mama and mémé are like the two rigid sides of the triangle that adjoin the right angle (and both claim to be right). Sarah, like the hypotenuse, is on the other side of the equation. Both sides, both value systems, fed into her identity. Like the mid-point of the hypotenuse, she kept her distance from both women when she grew older, but the original links and conflicts maintained their grip.

The words **table** and **roots** are significant. Both Kofman and Friedländer struggled with oppositions such as conflicting identities and cultures. Sometimes the conflicts were situated at the table. For example, when Friedländer was in the process of exploring and returning to his Jewish roots as an adolescent, he attends a Passover seder. Yet he refuses to eat the meat that is served because the seder fell on Good Friday. At Moissac, the scoutmaster (a father figure) invites Sarah to eat at his table. Eating at his kosher table represents a return to her Jewish roots. Yet she mentions in the following paragraph that she also secretly (clandestinement) receives letters from mémé (94). Therefore, the tension between her parents’ table and values, and
mémé’s returns in a different time and place. The use of the word *clandestinement* suggests that, although the war is over, she is still hiding.

Sarah was uprooted many times during her childhood. The expulsion from her childhood home commenced as she was eating at her mother’s table when a man came to their apartment and warned them to leave immediately and to go into hiding. The uprooting from Judaism began at mémé’s table; other displacements followed. The riddle about Pythagoras in this final chapter provides a point from which to indirectly revisit childhood trauma. Yet it propels the journey forward as well. The gifted student, nourished by her studies, will become a philosopher; she will sit at Pythagoras’ table.

The reference to Pythagoras recalls another riddle (posed by the sphinx at Thebes) and another triangle (the oedipal triangle which consists of mother, father and child). According to Freud, the oedipal conflict goes underground during latency and re-emerges during adolescence. Kofman steals her father’s fountain pen from her mother’s pocketbook and uses it during adolescence. “Un stylo comme l’on n’en fait plus, et qu’il fallait remplir avec de l’encre. Je m’en suis servie pendant toute ma scolarité. Il m’a ‘lâchée’ avant que je puisse me décider à l’abandonner” (9). Michael Stanislawski discusses the implications of the father’s fountain pen. “[T]he daughter surreptitiously steals the phallic, and grammatically masculine, ‘stylo’ of her dead father from her mother, who has kept it among other tokens of her murdered husband’s memory…This pen, so obviously a totem of that [paternal] authority, cannot be replaced by another,…it is this pen, and only this pen, that enabled her to study, but then failed her before she could abandon it—just like her father, we might propose, who failed her in some ineffable way, by volunteering for deportation when she was but a child, before she could abandon him in the ‘normal’ way, as a teenager or young adult” (153). Although Kofman does not mention the pen
in chapter XXIII, its presence is implicit since she used her father’s pen during her years as a student; this is the chapter where she describes her educational trajectory from Moissac to Jules Ferry and finally her years at the university. The presence of the pen, which accompanied the daughter on her path, attests to the absence of the father and to the path he took.

I return to the sphinx at the entrance to Thebes, not to draw a direct parallel, but to explore some dissonances. The sphinx poses a question to those who would enter and kills those who answer it incorrectly. When Oedipus answers the riddle correctly, the sphinx destroys herself and the city, which represents civilization, is freed. Kofman’s father was compelled to enter Auschwitz, the antithesis of civilization. At the entrance to Auschwitz, the concentrationary universe, there are no questions; rather there is an imposing sign, “Work makes you free”—an edict that contradicts itself when applied to the slave labor imprisoned there. Rabbi Kofman challenges this perverted world order by refusing to work on the Sabbath. However, this story does not take place in an ordered universe—neither Hebraic nor Hellenic. When Kofman’s father is arrested, his six children wail in the street like a Greek chorus; yet no one listens. There is no audience, no witness. The children suffocate on their tears. At Auschwitz, their father is suffocated (beaten and buried alive), not by a mythological creature, but by an ordinary monster—a Jewish kapo, the neighborhood butcher from the Rue des Rosiers who reopens his shop after the war. Unlike Greek tragedy, this story does not have an ending that restores order to the world. There is no closure for the victims of Auschwitz and none for the little girl who was left behind.

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31 See also Melissa Jacques’ discussion of the progression from Hebraic text (the story of Issac) to Hellenic text (Greek tragedy) in chapter 2 of Rue Ordener, rue Labat. “In the space of three pages, Kofman moves from a Hebraic textual encounter, to a Hellenic one. The central trauma of the narrative, the loss of the father, is thus enclosed within apposite religious and literary allusions” 242.
Towards the end of the final chapter (XXIII) Kofman writes about her life as a university student. “Étudiante, j’habite à la cité universitaire au pavillon Deutsch de la Meurthe. Une autre vie commence” (99). Yet she does not discuss her extraordinary scholarly accomplishments. Instead, she ends the text with a reference to mémé’s funeral. “Je n’ai pu me rendre à ses obsèques. Mais je sais que le prêtre a rappelé sur sa tombe qu’elle avait sauvé une petite fille juive pendant la guerre” (99). As Stanislawski suggests, the priest’s remark tells only part of the story. In the concluding pages of Quand vient le souvenir, Friedländer, as a young man, looks towards what he hopes will be a new beginning—“à l’aube d’une vie nouvelle” (Quand vient 188). His statement fits within the mainly linear structure of his text (including the progression of name changes) and ties in with some degree of resolution and healing. In contrast, there is “no relief, no consolation” in Kofman’s text (Smock, Introduction xii). Rue Ordener, rue Labat, which began with death via the reference to her father’s pen circles back to death with mémé’s funeral in a journey where the narrator’s pain is not laid to rest.

While both texts articulate the adult’s and the child’s voices, the structure of Quand vient le souvenir—an adult’s journal in the present juxtaposed with the child’s voice from the past, which Ezrahí calls a pas de deux—allows for a more distinct separation between past and present and for placement of the traumatic events of childhood within a linear continuum. Studying these first-person narratives together, despite their differences, underscores the foundational commonality of trauma suffered by two members of the 1.5 generation who experienced identity as a split, a twoness. Kofman and Friedländer employ some of the same techniques in their literary representations of the journey back to revisit childhood trauma. Objects represent the

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32 Stanislawski comments: “Or, we might add, how she both saved and condemned to misery a little Jewish girl during the war” 174.
split as well as other related aspects of childhood trauma. Photographs of the parent from a time before the narrator’s birth hold the *punctum* that wounds. Intertextuality plays a significant role. Themes from Meyrink’s *The Golem*—memory loss, identity confusion, a quest for cohesion—suffuse *Quand vient le souvenir*. Young Sarah’s implicit identification with the little mouse in La Fontaine’s fable conveys aspects of the dilemma of the hidden child such as bewilderment. Both texts engender conceptual dissonance, allowing the reader a glimpse into the minds of orphaned, frightened children who were too young to comprehend and cope with the forces that ruptured their childhoods.
Chapter 2

Haunted by History: *Un Secret* and *Dora Bruder*

This is exactly the crux of the second generation’s difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows.

Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*

The Holocaust haunts both Phillipe Grimbert’s *Un Secret* (2004) and Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* (1997). It is a literal haunting for the main character of *Un Secret*. The frail, sickly little boy, who was told that he is an only child, invents an invisible older brother. The imaginary sibling shares his room at night. Eventually he learns a secret. An older half-brother had existed. His name was Simon and he and his mother were murdered during the Holocaust.

*Un Secret* is characterized as a novel but it is semi-autobiographical. According to Philippe Lejeune, an autobiographical work must meet two conditions: the identity of the author, the narrator and the protagonist must be the same (Lejeune 15).

Un Secret meets these two conditions. The narrator is an adult who looks back upon his path from childhood to adulthood. He refers to himself in the first person and assumes the last name, Grimbert. Yet, he never uses a first name. This introduces a note of ambiguity about the identity of the author, narrator and protagonist.

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33 On the title page, the word, Roman appears underneath the title, Un Secret. In *Le Pacte autobiographique* Lejeune defines autobiography as follows: “Récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité.” Some of the conditions may not be entirely met. For example, the perspective may be mainly, but not completely retrospective. However, the author, narrator and protagonist *must* have the same identity: “Une identité est ou n’est pas. Il n’y a pas de degré possible, et tout doute entraîne une conclusion négative. Pour qu’il y ait autobiographie (et plus généralement littérature intime), il faut qu’il y ait identité de l’auteur, du narrateur et du personnage” 14-15.
Dora Bruder is the story of Patrick Modiano’s quest to find out about the past of a real person, a fifteen-year-old Jewish girl named Dora Bruder. He came across her name in a newspaper notice posted in 1941 by her parents who were looking for their daughter who had run away from the Catholic school that was sheltering her. The text is both biographical and autobiographical; in addition, it contains elements of autofiction. Modiano, who was born in 1945, is obsessed with the Occupation. According to Samuel Khalifia, Modiano is an “orphan of memory” who is “haunted by his own prehistory” (Khalifia 1). He copes with his own sense of belatedness by searching for information about Dora, an adolescent who lived and died during the Occupation.

Un Secret

Un Secret begins with the narrator’s recollection of his early childhood, surrounded by a loving, but secretive family. He knows that his parents, both good-looking athletes, spent the war years in a village in the south of France. But there are things about his parents’ past that he does not understand. One day, he accompanies his mother to the storage room and finds a dusty stuffed toy dog (un chien de peluche) in a trunk. Although his mother will not talk about the chien de peluche, it provides a clue to his family’s mysterious past. Its presence amongst other articles from that past suggests to the boy that there was another child in his family. It is just after his discovery of the chien de peluche that the boy invents his invisible older brother.

When he is an adolescent, Louise, a close friend of the family, decides to break her promise to his parents and to reveal the family secret to him. Before the war, his parents, Maxime and Tania, were brother-in-law and sister-in law. Hannah, Maxime’s first wife, and their

34 For a discussion of the biographical, autobiographical and autofictional aspects of Dora Bruder, see Cima 12-16.
son, Simon, were deported and murdered. Robert, Tania’s first husband, served in the French army and died as a prisoner of war. Maxime and Tania, who were passionately attracted to one another, felt responsible for Hannah’s and Simon’s deaths. After the war, they married and had a child, the narrator. This knowledge helps the narrator both to know about the brother who lived and died in the past and to separate from the invisible brother who he invents in the present. As he grows to adulthood he investigates further into individual and collective history. Eventually, he is able to mourn and to commemorate his brother. These steps help him to move forward in his own life.

Un Secret is composed of five numbered sections and an epilogue. Grimbert does not give titles or headings to these sections. However, for the purposes of this study, I provide headings that pertain to the focus of my reading of each section. Each one identifies a stage of the narrator’s journey. They are: “A Haunted Childhood” (Part I), “A Fabricated Past” (Part II), “Listening to Wounds” (Part III), “La Grande hache de l’Histoire”35 (Part IV), “Separating Death and Survival” (Part V) and “Mourning and Commemoration” (Epilogue).

The Body, Language and Conflicting Realities

Un Secret opens: “Fils unique, j’ai longtemps eu un frère. Il fallait me croire sur parole quand je servais cette fable à mes relations de vacances, à mes amis de passage. J’avais un frère. Plus beau, plus fort. Un frère aîné, glorieux, invisible” (11). Although the narrator has not yet identified himself as a member of the second generation, these opening lines introduce key issues

35 Cathy Caruth analyzes the concept of listening to wounds in “The Wound and the Voice” 1-9. I am adapting the heading, “La Grande hache de l’Histoire,” from a passage in George Perec’s W ou le souvenir d’enfance: “Je n’ai pas de souvenirs d’enfance’: je posais cette affirmation avec assurance, avec presque une sorte de défi…J’en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, l’Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps” (17). The French word hache means both axe and the letter h. Histoire with an initial capital letter means history; histoire with a lower case letter h means story. Perec uses all of these meanings in this passage.
of that group. This is, indeed, a child who has inherited the shadows of his parents’ trauma. He lives with the shade of a brother whose presence brings past trauma into the present in several ways. The brother is older than he is. Therefore, he is a connection to a time that preceded the narrator’s birth. Like the prehistory that overwhelms the narrator, the brother is stronger (plus fort) than he is. In addition, for the second generation, prehistory is almost palpable—there, yet not there—known, yet not known. Like the untold stories that inhabit his parents’ silences, his older brother is invisible.

The opening lines of *Un Secret* introduce the themes of body and language and establish connections between them. The boy relates to his brother’s body and compares it to his own. He needs to talk about this stronger, important body to others again and again. He needs listeners who will believe him—“*il fallait* me croire sur parole” (11, emphasis added)—even though the story is unbelievable. The repeated use of the imperfect tense as well as the word, *longtemps*, underscores the ongoing existence of the invisible brother during a large part of the narrator’s life. Like trauma, the brother persisted in unspecified, continuous time.

The opening lines juxtapose conflicting states. The first (I had a brother) is tangible and believable. The second (he was invisible) is intangible and unbelievable. This requires the reader to encounter strangeness and experience conceptual dissonance. In addition, the reader is drawn into a zone of uncertainty akin to what Todorov defines as the fantastic (Todorov 29). Therefore, the effect of the opening paragraph is to draw the reader into the boy’s world—an uncertain, unsettling, haunted atmosphere that will be further developed in the first section of the text.

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36 See Rothberg’s application of Felman and Laub’s discussion of encountering strangeness in *Traumatic Realism* 143.
A Haunted Childhood (Part I)

In the first section, the intersecting themes of body, language and conflicting realities help to develop the portrayal of a childhood haunted by history that preceded the child’s birth—traumatic history that is both individual (in this case, the family’s) and collective. Maxime, the boy’s father, had changed the family name from Grinberg to Grimbert. The boy, who was circumcised as an infant, was baptized, not when he was a baby, but when he was a child who was old enough to remember the ceremony. These contradictory rituals both involve language (prayers) and marks upon the body. The priest writes the boy’s name in the sacristy register and marks the sign of the cross upon his forehead with holy water. His body, however, bears a hidden mark from the circumcision. Unlike the sign of the cross upon his forehead, this sign is indelible; unlike water, it does not evaporate. The name change and the baptism are attempts to disguise the child’s Jewish origins and to save his life should persecution recur. However, these conflicting identities and the unspoken threats to his existence contribute to the atmosphere of uncertainty that pervades his world.

There are unanswered questions. For example, people often ask the boy about the origins of the family surname. When he conveys the questions to his father, Maxime replies, “Nous nous étions toujours appelés ainsi, martelait-il, cette évidence ne souffrait aucune contradiction: on trouvait trace de notre patronyme dès le Moyen Age, Grimbert n’était-il pas un héros du Roman du Renart?” (Grimbert 17). The change in spelling that Maxime hopes will allow his family to plant their roots deep in French soil is belied by their recent uprooting from Romania.

There is a vocabulary of cutting or wounding in this section of the text including the cut to the boy’s body, the scar (cicatrice) upon the family name and the feared cuts to the family tree

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37 In Le Roman de Renart, Grimbert serves the king. He is commanded to deliver Renart to the king’s court where Renart is put on trial.
This vocabulary underscores connections between body, language and individual and collective trauma. Much of family and collective history are cut out too. The boy knows that challenging his parents’ silence would open a wound: “Butant sans cesse contre le mur douloureux dont s’étaient entourés mes parents, je les aimais trop pour tenter d’en franchir les limites, pour écarter les lèvres de cette plaie. J’étais décidé à ne rien savoir” (17). He becomes complicit with their duplicity in order to protect them. In this passage the word *lèvres* has a double meaning; it means both the *edge of a wound* and *lips*. Speech becomes commensurate with wounding. If the boy asks questions that require his parents to speak, internal scars will rip open.

While Maxime and Tania keep secrets from their son, they confide in Louise, a close family friend. Because Louise was with them during the Occupation and knows the family’s secrets, her relationship with Maxime and Tania includes a connection to individual and collective history. There are links between body and language as well. Louise is a nurse and a masseuse. She listens to their secrets and cares while she massages their tired bodies. Part I establishes Louise as the empathic listener, not just for Maxime and Tania, but for their son. Louise and the boy share disappointment with their bodies. The boy is sickly; Louise is unattractive and has a clubfoot. Because of this, the boy feels close to her and free to talk about anything to her. While she nourishes his body with vitamin injections and other treatments, she listens to him.
A Fabricated Past (Part II)

Part II opens:

J’ai longtemps été un petit garçon qui se rêvait une famille idéale. A partir des rares images qu’ils me laissaient entrevoir j’ai imaginé la rencontre de mes parents. Quelques mots lâchés sur leur enfance, des bribes d’informations sur leur jeunesse, sur leur idylle, autant de parcelles sur lesquelles je me suis jeté pour construire mon improbable récit. J’ai dévidé à ma façon l’écheveau de leur vie et, de même que je m’étais inventé un frère, j’ai fabriqué de toutes pièces la rencontre des deux corps dont j’étais né, comme j’aurais écrit un roman. (35)

There are a number of similarities between this passage and the opening passage of Part I. For example, the first sentence of Part I (“Fils unique, j’ai longtemps eu un frère”) resembles the first sentence of Part II (“J’ai longtemps été un petit garçon qui se rêvait une famille idéale”). Both lines define aspects of his condition as a child that are linked to his family: the paradoxical self-perception of being an only child who had a brother and the state of being a rêveur, a daydreamer, who longed for a perfect family. In both passages, the use of the imperfect tense and the word, longtemps, places the child’s psychological state in continuous, unspecified past time. Both passages involve using the imagination as a means of coping with unspoken stories about his prehistory (his parents’ past)–secret stories that shape his world and which frighten him.

The family secret has two major, related strands: (1) the life and death of a half-brother who perished in the Holocaust and (2) his parents’ prior marriages and their affair. In both cases, he knows and he doesn’t know. In part I, he deals with knowing and not knowing about his dead brother by inventing a living, invisible older brother. In Part II, he copes with knowing and not knowing about his parents’ romance by composing an idealized story.
The opening paragraph of Part II reflects tension between two conflicting accounts about his parents’ past. One consists of scraps of information that the boy has picked up from his parents. The other is a whole story, a linear narrative that he constructs. This tension is reflected in the vocabulary. Vocabulary associated with the first conveys fragmentation through the use of words such as *pièces, bribes, parcelles* and *quelques mots*. The phrase, *l’écheveau de leur vie*, conveys confusion; *quelques mots lâchés sur leur enfance* suggests carelessness rather than intent to directly impart information. In contrast, vocabulary that refers to the story that he contrives consists of words of construction (*construire, fabriqué, écrire*) and of reconstruction (*dévidé* means both *to unwind* and *to wind up*). Then he fashions a whole, a complete narrative (*récit, roman*) from these bits and pieces.

The story that he constructs reflects connections between the body and language. For example, when he refers to the fragments of information provided by his parents he says, “autant de parcelles sur lesquelles je me suis jeté pour construire mon improbable récit.” The use of the word, *jeté*, conveys the physical act of jumping as well as the urgency of his desire to construct a story. The *parcelles* (which can mean *morsels* as well as *pieces*) are like morsels of food that he can digest and reformulate into a story that nourishes his desire to have an ideal family. The final sentence, “J’ai dévidé à ma façon l’écheveau de leur vie et, de même que je m’étais inventé un frère, j’ai fabriqué de toutes pièces la rencontre des deux corps dont j’étais né, comme j’aurais écrit un roman,” forms a link between the brother’s invisible body, his parents’ bodies and stories about them. The use of the reflexive, “je m’étais inventé” emphasizes his need to create these stories. In addition, this sentence joins the act of procreation (“la rencontre des deux corps dont j’étais né”) to the act of writing (“comme j’aurais écrit un roman”). The union of his parents’ bodies produces him. Yet he writes their story. This allows him to unravel and put in order the
tangled threads of his origins and form a contiguous thread attached to his own life narrative. However, it is a partly fictional thread that is underscored by movement from the imperfect and past perfect, indicating that something happened in the past to the conditional past, which indicates that something could have happened. In addition, there is a shift from un récit earlier in the passage to un roman at the end. A récit is a written or verbal narrative or accounting that is not necessarily linear and which may be fiction or non-fiction while a roman is a written work of fiction that is more often sequential and linear.

The linear narrative which he fabricates from scraps of information is a largely idyllic story. His attractive, athletic parents meet at a sports club, fall in love and marry. Because of rationing constrictions during the Occupation, they close their sportswear shop in Paris and move south to lodge with a family in Indre, a village where more food is available. They live a quiet, romantic life in this calm, bucolic setting. After the war, they move back to Paris, reopen their shop and have a child, the narrator. However, within this largely idyllic story, there exists tension with an underlying and incompatible darker side where individual and collective histories intersect. In Indre, Maxime and Tania occupy an oasis of serenity, but catastrophe looms in the newspapers. In Indres,

[l]e clapotis de la rivière renforce la quiétude des lieux, la lune baigne de sa lueur fantomatique les remparts qui les dominent: comment imaginer le hurlement des sirènes arrachant à leur sommeil des familles apeurées? Comment se figurer l’angoisse des femmes et d’enfants serrés les uns contre les autres dans la pénombre de caves qui pourraient devenir leur tombeau? (51)

The narrator presents the unresolved tension between conceivable and inconceivable experience by posing unanswered questions. Rather than attempting to resolve the tension, he
prolongs it by using the word, *serrés*, in a different context: “Quand la fraîcheur de la nuit tombe sur leurs épaules ils [Tania et Maxime] rentrent, serrés l’un contre l’autre, gravissent l’escalier…et s’aime en silence dans le lit étroit enlacés jusqu’à l’aube” (51-52). The repeated use of *serrés* links doomed women and children with two lovers through their bodies. The contiguous placement of these two images engenders conceptual dissonance. Part II ends with a happy occasion, the narrator’s birth. Yet, there is a dark side. He is a fragile infant, in danger of dying. The baby survives, but death will figure prominently in the next section where the narrator will become a secondary witness to the resurfacing of individual and collective historical trauma.

**Listening to Wounds (Part III)**

The boy, now fifteen-years-old, views two different films about the Holocaust. The first is a fictionalized version that he watches on television at home with his mother. The second is a documentary shown to his class at school. By juxtaposing two different forms of representation (fiction and documentary) Grimbert creates tension between conceivable and inconceivable experience that results in conceptual dissonance for the boy. The narrator focuses on one scene from each film. In the first, he watches lines of naked people filing towards what they have been told are showers. Although this is not an ordinary event, elements of the scene make it possible for the viewer to relate it to aspects of understandable experience. For example, the viewer/narrator knows that these are live actors in a fictional representation that was shot in a studio. Grimbert uses a vocabulary that emphasizes fictional aspects of the film: “nous avons assisté à cette *fiction* en noir et blanc: décors *reconstitués* en studio, *comédiens en uniforme*, figurants massés dans des enclos” (65, emphasis added). The boy, now an adolescent, is
fascinated by the nude bodies, particularly the women and he responds with his body. The sight evokes sexual desire: “Les premières nudités qu’il m’était donné d’apercevoir à l’écran, taches pâles qui se détachaient sur le fond gris des baraoulements. Sachant trop bien ce que j’allais en faire une fois seul dans ma chambre, j’ai attardé mon regard sur ces chairs déjà profanées” (65).

This is the first time he sees nude bodies on the screen. Yet even this exciting aspect of normal adolescent sexuality is tainted by the Holocaust. Normal eroticism becomes distorted by the context of the film. It links his body to collective historical trauma.

Paradoxically the second film, the documentary, is further removed from comprehensible reality than the fictional representation. These are not live actors placed against a background of recognizable objects such as barracks, but body parts that form part of a strange, horrific landscape.

La projection commença: pour la première fois je vis les montagnes. Ces terribles montagnes dont je n’avais lu que des descriptions…Des terrils de chassures, de vêtements, des pyramides de cheveux et de membres. Ni figurants, ni décors contrairement à ce film que ma mère et moi avions regardé en silence.” (67-68)

In this traumatic context, words such as montagnes, terrils and pyramides change meaning.

Again, he responds with his body. He is riveted (rivé) in his seat, in particular by the image of the corpse of a naked woman. Her legs open and close as a soldier drags her by her foot towards a common grave. Rothberg’s theory of traumatic realism is helpful in understanding the boy’s response as he tries to simultaneously hold the pictures of naked women from the two films in his mind: “La vision était trop forte, l’obscénité trop violente pour que je pense emporter cette image dans ma chambre” (68). The understandable scene with naked actresses in the first film provokes sexual desire. The images of the woman’s naked corpse in the documentary are outside
of understandable experience for the boy. The repetition of the word, *trop*, emphasizes the extremity of the image. The scene is too obscene to evoke an erotic response for him. Instead, his body remains frozen.

In addition to juxtaposing scenes from the two films, Grimbert contrasts the image of the corpse from the documentary with the live woman that she once was. The narrator fills in the complementary moving image. “Ce corps désarticulé avait été une femme. Une femme qui avait couru les magasins, contemplé dans un miroir la ligne élégante de sa nouvelle robe, une femme qui avait remis en place une mèche échappée de son chignon: elle n’était plus que cette poupée disloquée, traînée comme un sac et dont le dos rebondissait sur les cailloux d’un sentier (68).

He provides what once was as well as the remains of what once was.

The *punctum* is the woman’s escaped lock of hair. It is a link to an earlier passage wherein the narrator expressed his childhood longing for a brother whose body resembled his:

J’étais toujours envieux, en visite chez un camarade, quand s’ouvrait la porte sur un autre qui lui ressemblait quelque peu. Des cheveux en bataille, un sourire en coin qu’on me présentait en deux mots: “Mon frère.” Une énigme, cet intrus avec lequel il fallait tout partager, y compris l’amour. Un vrai frère. Un semblable dans le visage duquel on se découvrait pour trait commun une mèche rebelle ou une dent de loup, un compagnon de chambrée dont on savait le plus intime, les humeurs, les goûts, les faiblesses, les odeurs. Une étrangeté pour moi qui régnais seul sur l’empire de quatre pièces de l’appartement familial.” (11-12)

In that passage, the resemblance included common traits such as “une mèche rebelle.” Now the boy is at a different stage of development. As an adolescent, he is touched by the thought of a

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38 The use of the word, *disloquée*, conveys a double meaning. This is a broken body; it has also been dislocated from its normal setting.
lovely woman who tucks an escaped lock of hair into her *chignon*. The poignancy of this ordinary gesture wounds him. The inarticulate woman speaks to him through her body via the mental juxtaposition of both images—the voluntary, feminine gesture of a woman and the involuntary and sometimes obscene movements of a desecrated corpse.

The boy sitting next to him taps his elbow and makes obscene jokes about the naked corpse. As part of his joke, he assumes a German accent and says, “Ach. Chiens de juifs.” At first, the narrator laughs because one of the popular boys, one with a *corps glorieux*, has deigned to pay attention to him. But then he connects to the horror and outrage through his body. His stomach turns. Instead of vomiting he hits the boy repeatedly. The other boy responds with blows to the narrator’s body. A violent fight ensues in which both of them are injured. Now the narrator has a wound of his own. Wounded, he is now capable of listening to another’s wounds. When Louise sees his injury and hears his story, she interprets the wound as being a sign—a sign that he is now ready to hear the story of the secret and that she must break the silence. Towards the end of Part III, she begins to tell him the family’s story. He learns about his brother, Simon, a strong, athletic child, whom Maxime adored.

*La Grande hache de l’Histoire* *(Part IV)*

The narrator, now a secondary witness, revisits the trauma with Louise. In Part III, he learned mainly about the existence of deceased family members. In Part IV, the family’s history becomes more entwined with collective historical trauma. During the Occupation the family is engulfed in an atmosphere of collective upheaval where the world is turned upside down. It is unclear who is friend and who is foe since uniforms no longer define the enemy. The police,

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39 For a discussion of listening to another’s trauma through one’s own trauma see Caruth, “Literature and the Enactment of Memory: Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*” 25-56.
once guardians and protectors, collaborate with the Gestapo. People with kindly gazes betray their neighbors. The function of public transportation changes meaning. In a previous reality, buses and trains took people to desired destinations—work, errands, holidays. Now they take them to their doom. The collective upheaval is echoed in the family’s upheaval. The existence of the Jews as a group is threatened. Similarly, Maxime’s and Hannah’s marriage is threatened largely because of the collective upheaval. Tania’s husband, Robert, is now a prisoner of war. Because Tania is lonely, she becomes closer to her sister-in-law’s family. Tania’s proximity fuels Maxime’s desire for her.

The entwining of individual and collective trauma is conveyed by connections between body and language. For example, all Jews are ordered to report to the police station to have their identity papers stamped with a red mark. As a result, the individual is now defined as part of a different collective group. The individual’s identity is now subsumed by the new collective identity. He and his group are no longer French. They are the Other. All Jews must wear the yellow star sewn upon their clothing. Through these signs, the family recognizes others’ bodies as being Jewish. This results in the sometimes reluctant creation of a community through its marked bodies.

The characters react to these inscriptions through their bodies. For example, Louise feels the weight of the star more heavily than the weight of her orthopedic shoe: “Louise a obéi, elle a cousu l’insigne à sa poitrine. Elle ne s’est pas senti la force de se dérober mais l’étoile lui pèse, plus encore que la lourde semelle de sa chaussure orthopédique” (108). Maxime experiences the order to wear the star as a slap (un gifle). He refuses to comply. His reaction is to train more intensively at the gym and to compete in more contests. He wants to cover his body with

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40 For an analysis of Charlotte Delbo’s description of the altered meanings of train stations in *Auschwitz et après*, see Rothberg *Traumatic Realism* 141-45.
different signs—medals. In addition, when arguing with his family about his non-compliance with the official order, he refers to a form of public representation in connection with his body. He protests that his body, which he has reconfigured in order to belie his origins, bears no resemblance to the caricatured bodies that portray Jews as enemies of France at the exhibit at the Berlitz Palace in Paris (108).

Maxime comes to the conclusion that the family must escape to the Free Zone. They make plans. Through the help of one of Louise’s contacts they find people who will shelter them in Indres, a village that is in the Free Zone. They decide that the men would depart first, establish themselves and then send for the women and Simon. All goes as planned…until Hannah’s nervous collapse. Hannah (Maxime’s first wife and Simon’s mother) is fragile. As the external world crumbles, her internal structure falls apart. Grimbert uses the metaphor of walls. Hannah’s first support wall tumbles when her parents, trapped by language (they registered at the police station) are arrested at their home and deported. Language—a letter—causes the collapse of the second wall. Maxime writes from the Free Zone that Tania, who was in Lyons, has unexpectedly joined the men in Indres. When Hannah reads this, she knows that her marriage is doomed. First her body fails (“ses jambes ne la soutiennent plus”). This is followed by a psychological breakdown (124-25).

Her breakdown leads to betrayal and deportation via the written and spoken word as well as through body language. The women and Simon depart towards the free zone. Shortly before they were to cross the demarcation line, they stop at a café. Nazi officers enter and demand to see papers. Hannah, seated at a table separate from the others, looks boldly into the officers’ eyes and deliberately shows them her real identity papers in addition to her false ones. Then, when Simon walks out of the bathroom, she dooms him, too, with the words, “C’est mon fils” (131).
The good mother becomes the monstrous mother. Grimbert compares her to Medea. “Hannah la timide, la mère parfaite, s’est transformée en héroïne tragique, la fragile jeune femme est soudain devenue une Médée, sacrifiant son enfant et sa propre vie sur l’autel de son amour blessé” (127). Hannah seeks to hurt the one who wounded her—her husband. This severely depressed, suicidal woman acts out her rage via masochistic and murderous gestures. She acts within the context of a new and perverted world order that makes it possible for her to use ordinary words to set off deadly consequences. Maxime refused to be classified by his body or his documents. Hannah uses identity as a weapon. She throws off the camouflage first for herself and then for the child who looks like his father. Unlike Medea, Hannah is not a witch. She cannot produce spells nor kill Tania with a poisoned dress. But the long-term effects of her actions cast a pall upon Maxime’s and Tania’s union.41

Separating Death and Survival (Part V)

According to Judith Herman, “[r]ecover can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (Trauma and Recovery 133). Through a healing relationship “the survivor re-creates…psychological faculties” such as “basic capacities for trust autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and intimacy” (133).42 Louise provides a healing relationship by listening to the boy and by lifting the veil of secrecy that oppresses his childhood. As a result, he becomes more independent and competent: “Je savais désormais ce que recherchaient les yeux de mon père lorsqu’ils fixaient l’horizon, je comprenais ce qui rendait ma mère muette. Pour autant je ne succombais plus sous le poids de ce silence, je le portais et il

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41 Louise and Esther do not tell Maxime that Hannah’s actions were deliberate. Instead, they tell him that she made a careless mistake with her documents.
étoffait mes épaules. Je poursuivais mes études avec succès” (158). He begins to relinquish childhood fears and to develop a more mature sense of identity: “Depuis que je pouvais les nommer, les fantômes avaient desserré leur étreinte: j’allais devenir un homme” (158). Now that he has heard the story, his body becomes stronger. Furthermore, he is no longer haunted by Simon’s invisible presence. “Les révélations de mon amie ne m’avaient pas seulement rendu plus fort, elles avaient aussi transformé mes nuits: je ne luttais plus avec mon frère, maintenant que je connaissais son nom” (157). He begins to relinquish his invisible brother and to thrive in the present as a separate individual.

However, personal and historical traumas resurface unexpectedly at his baccalaureate examination. The narrator is at his orals examination, a stressful but normal event that takes place in the present. But, he draws the name, Laval, which evokes horrors from the past. Thus the present normal reality intersects with an inconceivable reality from the past. The resurfacing of past trauma affects his body as well as his speech. He is paralyzed and cannot summon up sufficient language for a coherent response. He can only mumble a few words about the Collaboration. Convinced by the examiner’s response that the examiner is a Vichy sympathizer, the past increases its presence in the present for the narrator. He feels walled up (muré) by his incapacity to speak (166).43 He fails the exam.

43 The passage is, “A l’oral du bac, j’avais tiré un papier sur lequel était inscrit le sujet à traiter, qui se résumait à un nom: Laval. Paralysé, j’avais bredouillé une phrase sur la collaboration, une seule, qui avait mécontenté mon examinateur. Persuadé d’avoir affaire à un nostalgique de Vichy je m’étais muré dans un mutisme qui m’avait valu de redoubler ma terminale.” The use of the word, muré, underscores the transgenerational aspect of trauma. It recalls a passage from Part I that describes a wall of silence that encased his parents’ sorrow. It begins with reflections upon the name change from Grinberg to Grimbert: “Un ‘m’ pour un ‘n’, un ‘t’ pour un ‘g’, deux infimes modifications. Mais ‘aime’ avait recouvert ‘haine’, dépossédé du ‘j’ai’ j’obéissais désormais à l’impératif du ‘tais’. Butant sans cesse contre le mur douloureux dont s’étaient entourés mes parents, je les aimais trop pour tenter d’en franchir les limites, pour écarter les lèvres de cette plaie. J’étais décidé à ne rien savoir” 17. In both passages, the body’s reactions in the present are spurred by references to names from the past. In both instances the boy responds by not knowing and not speaking.
Afterwards, he decides to take action so that he does not remain paralyzed by the past. He finds out more about what happened to Hannah and Simon. Knowing more about their fate helps him in the process of separating his life from his brother’s death. This requires research that takes him to sources outside of the family—a venture that helps him to separate further from them. The next year, he takes his baccalaureate exam again. This time he passes with distinction (*avec mention*). In addition, he takes action by choosing a career path that relates to his personal journey. He decides to become a psychologist so that, like Louise, the empathic listener, he can help others with their pain.

**Mourning and Commemoration (Epilogue)**

During the epilogue the narrator completes his journey with acts of mourning and commemoration. The process of writing this book, he decides, will be an act of mourning. “Dans ces pages reposerait la blessure dont je n’avais jamais pu faire le deuil” (180, emphasis added). Judith Herman notes, “[t]raumatic losses rupture the ordinary sequence of generations and defy the ordinary social conventions of bereavement” (188). In *Un Secret*, the adult narrator never meets Simon who remains, paradoxically, both a child and his older brother. Furthermore, the normal process of bereavement never took place for Simon’s family. There was no funeral and no resting place for his body. The narrator must somehow mourn a double loss: a child’s death and the pain of losing a sibling who he never knew. The solution for him lies in telling the story. In addition, he performs an act of individual and collective commemoration by giving Simon’s photograph to Serge Klarsfeld to be placed among other photographs in Klarsfeld’s book that memorializes Jewish children who were deported from France during the Occupation. The
narrator says that this book will be Simon’s grave. Through language—books—the narrator performs burial rites for an absent body and lays his brother’s ghost to rest.

Testimonial Objects

In this section, I address the role of testimonial objects in the narrator’s journey from haunting to healing. The stuffed toy dog (le chien de peluche) that the little boy finds in the trunk in the storage room, functions as a testimonial object. Like the locks of hair in Miller’s “Family Hair Looms,” the dog bears witness to a previous meaningful existence. It “provides points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal and cultural recollection” that travel across time and space and elicits testimony between generations (Hirsch and Spitzer “Testimonial Objects” 353, 358; “The Tile Stove 145”). The little dog—companion to both the boy and his deceased sibling—serves as a catalyst throughout the narrator’s journey from haunting to healing.

A Haunted Childhood (Part I) and Testimonial Objects

The first part of the text establishes the haunted atmosphere of the young boy’s home, infused with silences, lies, secrets and half-truths. There are objects in the apartment that are part of this atmosphere. For example, there is a single candlestick tucked away in a locked cupboard. Like the stories that have missing pieces, the candlestick is the remnant of a pair, a whole.

44 There is no entry for Simon Grinberg in Klarsfeld’s Les 11,400 Enfants juifs déportés de France, the volume that serves as a collective index. There is, however, an entry for Michel Grinberg, who lived on Gambetta Street in Paris, as did the family in Un Secret. The photograph of Michel Grinberg that appears on page 741 of French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial matches the description of the photograph in Un Secret. The inscription underneath the photograph reads, “Michel Grinberg was 8 when he was deported on September 21, 1942, on convoy 35 with his mother, Anna. They lived at 39 bis avenue Gambetta in Paris (20th arr.)” Grimbert blurs the distinction between autobiography and fiction. On one hand, the photograph in French Children of the Holocaust and the information provided underneath it are consistent with details provided in Un Secret. On the other hand, Grimbert uses the name Simon instead of Michel.
Despite his father’s insistence that the family always had a French surname that dates back to the Middle Ages, the candlestick suggests a different story—one that includes lighted candles on Friday nights and other Jewish ceremonies.

The family is oppressed by an impossible mourning (“un deuil impossible”) and although they try to shield him, he shares their feelings of sorrow, guilt and shame without knowing why. Burdened by unknown shadows, he feels their weight in his body:

Unique objet d’amour, tendre souci de mes parents, *je dormais pourtant mal,*

*agit par de mauvais rêves.* Je pleurais sitôt ma lampe éteinte, *j’ignorais à qui s’adressaient ces larmes* qui traversaient mon oreiller et se perdaient dans la nuit.

*Honteux sans en connaître la cause, souvent coupable sans raison,* je retardais le moment de sombrer dans le sommeil. Ma vie d’enfant me fournissait chaque jour des tristesses et des craintes que j’entretenais dans ma solitude. Ces larmes, il me fallait quelqu’un avec qui les partager.” (12, emphasis added)

The boy is struggling with the paradoxical nature of trauma—the need to know versus the need to not know and the need to speak versus the need to remain silent. At this point he has decided not to know because to break the silence would open a wound for his parents. Yet, he feels compelled to speak to someone about the incomprehensible pain that he feels around him and within himself. The opportunity to share his tears occurs when he encounters the *chien de peluche.*

The *chien de peluche* makes its first appearance when the boy accompanies his mother to the storage room. It provides points of intersection between past and present and between memory and postmemory as well as an encounter between generations. Tania was looking for magazines that had published her fashion designs. She opens an old trunk and is surprised to
uncover the *chien de peluche* that had belonged to Simon. This emissary of buried trauma was sleeping just under the trunk’s cover. Like buried trauma, it resurfaces belatedly and unexpectedly intrudes into the present.

Both Tania and her son react with their bodies. Tania jumps. The boy grabs the *chien de peluche* and hugs it to his chest. For Tania, this is an involuntary intersection of past and present and of memory (hers) and postmemory (her son’s). Not wanting to reveal the past to him, she asks him to put the *chien de peluche* back in the trunk. She tries to avoid a testimonial encounter between generations. Nevertheless, a door has opened for the boy and a journey towards knowing begins.

The worn fur of the *chien de peluche* and its knitted coat suggest that another child had handled it and loved it. Who was that child? The text implies that the boy suspects, from the presence of the object amongst family possessions and from his mother’s spoken and body language that this child is closely related to him. The boy complies when his mother instructs him to put the *chien de peluche* back in the trunk. However, that night, he invents an older and invisible brother.\(^{45}\) It seems likely that his invention of the invisible brother after his encounter with this concrete object, the *chien de peluche*, helps the boy to focus the diffused haunting that pervades his world and which frightens him. Paradoxically, although the brother is invisible, he has a body that seems to be tangible. At night the boy lays his head upon his brother’s chest. He talks to him and his brother reassures him. Once there is substance to the haunting, it no longer frightens him.

\(^{45}\) Gabrielle Schwab argues that “this key scene…testifies to the generative formation of unconscious knowledge.” The stuffed animal “functions as a transferential and a transformational object” that is part of a mourning process where emotions about the dead child are displaced onto the companion animal. See “Replacement Children” 290, 296.
At the boy’s insistence there is a subsequent foray into the storage room with his mother. This time he refuses to leave the *chien de peluche* closed up in the storage trunk. When he insists upon taking the *chien de peluche* into the family’s apartment, he takes a significant step towards uncovering past trauma and bringing it into the light of day. Furthermore, he places it on the main site of his fears—the bed where he cries and has disturbing dreams. Finally, he names it Sim, a truncated version of Simon. Why does he name it Sim? The adult narrator ponders: “Où étais-je allé lui chercher ce nom? Dans l’odeur poussiéreuse de sa peluche? Au détour des silences de ma mère, dans la tristesse de mon père?” (23). It seems likely that, like many children of the second generation, he overheard parts of conversations and bits of information including part of his brother’s name.46 He knows and he doesn’t know. As a result of his attachment to the *chien de peluche*, this knowledge is beginning to come into the open. However, the knowledge that he is not yet ready to fully acknowledge, is held in two separate, yet connected pieces. One is an invisible, unnamed body that is defined as a brother. The other, the *chien de peluche*, holds a fragment of his brother’s name. Both sleep with him at night and are his companions during the day. According to Hirsch and Spitzer, personal possessions bequeathed directly or indirectly can be interpreted as “clues to an opaque and haunting past” (“Testimonial Objects” 354-55).

Significantly, the name, Simon, means *to be heard* or *he has heard*. It shares the same root as the Hebrew word, *shema*, which means, *hear; listen*. There is a story that must be heard before the ghosts of the past can be put to rest. The entreaty to be heard is embedded in the name that the boy gives to this object, this bequest across time and space from another child.

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46 Schwab observes that Sim is a diminutive and a cryptonym of Simon. “This utterly uncanny knowledge can only have been generated unconsciously, perhaps through his unwittingly picking up a name that had been hushed up” (291). While I agree with Schwab’s position, my own emphasis is upon the fragmentation of the name; it echoes the fragmented nature of the boy’s knowledge about his prehistory.
Part III. Listening to Wounds and Testimonial Objects

The testimonial object, the *chien de peluche*, is not physically present in the scene where the boy watches the documentary film about the Holocaust with his class. However, the words, *Ach! Chiens de juifs!* (shouted by one of his classmates) and *poupée disloquée* (his description of the corpse) are verbal associations to it. When the boy watches the documentary film, the sight of the corpse of the naked woman commands his attention. The woman’s dead body functions as a testimonial object. Like the *chien de peluche*, it attests to a prior meaningful existence. The narrator reflects, “Ce corps désarticulé avait été une femme” (68, emphasis added). The woman had a story. He does not know what it was, but he makes one up. However, what he sees on the screen is not a woman, but an object. His choice of words to describe that object, *poupée disloquée*, is significant. A *poupée*, a doll, is a child’s toy; it is a word that provides a verbal association to another child’s toy, the *chien de peluche* that he found in the storage trunk. The body is about to be covered with earth. Like the *chien de peluche*, the woman’s broken body speaks to the boy across time and space about another truncated and buried story.

In Part I, the narrator reflected upon minor changes to names that meant the difference between death and survival. Grinberg to Grimbert involves a change of two letters. *Chien de peluche* to *chiens de juifs* involves a change of two words. When the classmate assumes a German accent and says, “Ach! Chiens de juifs!” he refers to the woman’s corpse. However, the phrase evidently holds additional meanings for the narrator. Because of associative links, it refers not only to the woman, but to his brother. While *chien de peluche* represents the beloved child, Simon, *chiens de juifs* points to the fate of that child. The juxtaposition of these two realities, the believable (the beloved child) and the inconceivable (the child’s fate) via associative links to the testimonial object creates conceptual dissonance.
The phrase, *Ach! Chiens de juifs*, creates points of intersection between past and present and between individual and collective history. Furthermore, these points of intersection trigger the next stage of the boy’s journey. The classmate sitting next to him is a popular athlete who has never spoken to him. When he makes crude remarks about the corpse of the naked woman, he laughs and taps the boy’s elbow. The boy laughs too because he wants to be accepted by his peers: “J’ai ri parce qu’il m’avait poussé du coude, parce que c’était la première fois que l’un de ces corps glorieux recherchait la complicité du mien” (69). This response relates to the present reality. However, as present and past realities converge, his body responds differently: “J’ai ri jusqu’à la nausée” (69). Although unstated in the text, his classmate’s *corps glorieux* is reminiscent of the doctrine of the Aryan master race; his words are the same as those shouted by the Nazis. When he hits the other boy in the present, in his mind he strikes out at Nazi oppressors from the past too. As a result of his reaction, he is no longer afraid to fight and he acquires a wound that, for Louise, is a sign that he is ready to listen to her testimony. In addition, the text implies that another *corps glorieux* hovers in the background—the athletic, invisible body of his brother. For years, the boy wrestled with his invisible brother and always lost. This time he does not lose. Now he is ready to confront the ghosts of postmemory that, until now, have overwhelmed him.

**Part IV. La Grande hache de l’Histoire and Testimonial Objects**

Louise tells him that Simon dressed his *chien de peluche* in a warm knitted coat in preparation for their journey to the Free Zone. At the café, he confides the *chien de peluche* to Louise while he goes to the bathroom. When the Gestapo soldiers enter, she slips it under the table—out of sight. Simon, however, does not remain out of sight. When he comes out of the
bathroom, he is condemned by his mother’s words, “c’est mon fils” and *la grande hache de l’Histoire* separates him from his *chien de peluche*. Simon’s path leads to deportation and death with his mother. The *chien de peluche* remains with Louise, a witness to the event, who carries it across the demarcation line and delivers it to Maxime. Unable to bear the sight of objects that belonged to his child, Maxime stores it out of sight. Louise carries Simon’s story as well and years later she delivers it to his brother.

The testimonial object, the *chien de peluche*, reflects bonds that connect Louise, Simon and the narrator. There are bonds of trust. The narrator trusts Louise, the empathic listener, more than he trusts his parents. Before Simon goes to the bathroom, he entrusts his *chien de peluche* to Louise, not to his depressed, distracted mother. In addition, there are physical bonds to this object. All three of them hug it closely to their bodies during difficult situations. Simon hugs it during the journey toward the Free Zone—a time when his mother was, no doubt, emotionally unavailable to him. After Hannah and Simon exit from the café with the Gestapo, Louise recalls feeling an object that was under the table bump against her leg—the *chien de peluche*. Its contact with a part of her body that is associated with her physical disability (Louise limps) underscores the emotional wounds of this traumatic event—Simon’s deportation and her inability to save him. She hugs the *chien de peluche* and sheds tears. As a child, the narrator turned to the *chien de peluche* for comfort when he fought with and was always defeated by his invisible brother. The testimonial encounter with Louise in Part IV propels the boy’s journey. Now that he knows the story of the former owner of the object, he no longer fights with his ghost.
Part V. Separating Death and Survival and Testimonial Objects

The impact of the testimonial encounter that takes place between Louise and the narrator becomes more evident at the beginning of Part V. Now that the narrator knows the story associated with the *chien de peluche*, he can no longer bear to look at it and, like his father, he puts it out of sight. When he places it in the storage trunk, he finds another object—an album that includes photographs of Simon. He takes one of the photos, gazes at it and puts it in his pocket. These two acts—putting away the *chien de peluche* and taking away the photo—suggest further progress in the narrator’s journey. During his haunted childhood, unacknowledged knowledge was held in two places. The invisible body was identified as a brother and the *chien de peluche*, Sim, held part of his brother’s name. The photo represents a more integrated and fuller level of knowledge. Name, body and identity are together. Furthermore, Simon now has a face with some features that resemble the narrator’s.

The photo bears witness to both life and death. The picture of the little boy in front of a wheat field attests to his life. The date inscribed on the back of the photo indicates when it was taken. The narrator realizes that it was taken during the last summer of eight-year-old Simon’s life. The dated photo situates his brother’s life and death in past time. In contrast, traumatic time—haunted time—is continuous and traumatic knowledge is not possessed consciously. Instead it intrudes into the present against the conscious will of the individual. The acquisition of the photo suggests that the narrator is taking steps towards possessing conscious knowledge of the trauma and towards truly distinguishing his own life in the present from Simon’s life and death in the past. Therefore the finding and acquisition of the photograph has a positive effect upon the boy’s life.
There are other signs of healing and growth that result from his testimonial encounter with Louise. The narrator acknowledges that Louise gave him back his history, helped to disperse his ghosts and relieved him of a burden. This leads to a course of transformative action. Several years later, he decides to pursue the study of psychology in order to become a psychologist so that, like Louise, he will be able to help relieve others of their emotional burdens. “Délivré du fardeau qui pesait sur mes épaules j’en avais fait une force, j’en ferais de même avec ceux qui viendraient à moi” (169). Subsequently, he progresses further along his journey through another testimonial encounter between generations---this time between father and son. It, too, relates to the *chien de peluche*. He initiates it when Maxime belatedly and unexpectedly revisits the trauma of Simon’s deportation and death.

The family adopted a dog, Echo, that the narrator says, replaced Sim, the *chien de peluche*. (Schwab calls this “the imprint of unconscious naming” 296). However, this time it is not the son who has an intense relationship with Sim’s replacement, but his father. Maxime’s love for Echo exceeds the usual affection for a pet. Indeed, it appears that the dog is the echo of his lost child, Simon, and that its death is the echo of Simon’s death. When Echo dies Maxime is overwhelmed by feelings of grief and guilt. The dog’s death seems to affect him more profoundly than Simon’s because it triggers a revisiting of Simon’s death. Maxime is responsible for Echo’s death because he did not attach him to his leash as they were crossing an avenue. The dog was hit by a car and killed. This event bears obvious resemblance to the circumstances surrounding Simon’s death. Maxime was not there to protect his child at another dangerous crossing---the demarcation line between Occupied France and the Free Zone. Nazi soldiers took Hannah and Simon away in a car which led them to their deaths. Caruth’s analysis of the story of Tancred illuminates Maxime’s reaction (*Unclaimed Experience*, 1-9). Tancred accidentally kills
his beloved, but he only hears her cries belatedly--when he strikes a tree with his sword in an enchanted forest. Like Tancred, Maxime hears the second wound that cries out to him. It is then that he hears the echo, the disembodied voice of his child.

The dog’s death triggers a testimonial encounter between father and son, but this time the generational transmission of information is reversed. Instead of the generation of memory imparting information to the generation of postmemory, it is the son who delivers family and collective history to the father. The son provides answers to the father’s unspoken questions. Furthermore, he makes it possible for Maxime’s unconscious reliving of Simon’s death to become transformed into a revisiting of past trauma on a conscious level. The testimonial encounter occurs after Maxime tells his son that he is responsible for Echo’s death: “Il m’a dit qu’Echo était mort par sa faute. Je me suis entendu lui dire que c’était vrai, qu’il était responsable de cela, mais de cela seulement” (171). The son’s reply acknowledges that he hears his father on a deeper level---that he knows that this event is not just about the present; it is a revisiting of past trauma.

The son continues by supplying information about Hannah’s and Simon’s fates including the number and destination of the convoy, the dates of deportation and death and that they were gassed on the day after their arrival at Auschwitz. These concrete facts place the traumatic events in time and space. In addition, it relieves, somewhat, Maxime’s self-torture about Hannah’s and Simon’s fates. His imaginings were even worse than reality. Now he knows that, at least, they did not endure months of suffering before they died. Furthermore, the son encourages his father to let go of his misplaced feelings of guilt about the past so that he can live in the present. He says, “Seule la haine des persécuteurs était responsable de la mort d’Hannah et de Simon. Sa douleur d’aujourd’hui, sa culpabilité de toujours ne devaient pas permettre à cette haine
d’exercer encore une fois ses effets” (172). Trauma, like an echo, repeats not once, but over and over again. The son puts traumatic events that have been encased in silence and secrecy, into language. Through his actions he lessens his father’s burden of guilt and secrecy, ameliorates some of his pain and reduces trauma’s present and future reverberations. There are positive results for the son, too. As a weak and sickly child he felt that he was a disappointment to his father. In this scenario he assumes the role of a strong adult and helps his father with his weakness. In addition, the encounter is an initial step towards practicing his future profession. He has become an empathic witness.

**Epilogue: Mourning and Commemoration and Testimonial Objects**

There are two testimonial objects in the epilogue. The first is a cemetery for dogs. The second is the photograph of Simon that he found in the storage room. The narrator’s encounter with the cemetery initiates his decision to mourn through writing. The photograph is integral to his act of commemoration. Mourning and commemoration are the narrator’s final steps in his journey from haunting to healing.

The narrator takes a walk on property that belongs to Josée de Chambrun, President Laval’s daughter and encounters a cemetery for dogs. The inscriptions on the tombstones allude to stories. One, in particular, draws his attention. It says,

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Whisky
1948-1962
Chien de Soko,
ami fidèle de mon père

Josée de Chambrun
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The inscription prompts a revisiting of past trauma for the narrator: “Le nom [Laval] était de
nouveau sorti de son chapeau” (180).

When at the orals exam for his baccalaureate, he drew the name, Laval, past trauma
possessed him. He was petrified, mute and frozen like the stones before him. This revisiting of
past trauma is different. This time the trauma does not control him. Now he is capable of
expressing his outrage: “Le président Laval, qui avait encouragé—afin de ne pas séparer les
familles plaida-t-il pour sa défense—la déportation des enfants de moins de seize ans avec leurs
parents. Voilà ce que j’aurais répondu à l’examinateur le jour du bac, s’il ne m’avait pétifié. Et
j’aurais même ajouté la phrase odieuse de Brasillach: ‘Surtout n’oubliez pas les petits’” (180,
emphasis added). The use of the past conditional and past perfect tenses in this passage
underscores a perceptual difference that acknowledges his body’s previous stone-like state, a
state that precluded language. This revisiting allows him to use language not only to return to,
but to work through, past trauma.

Then he makes a decision to use language to progress further in his journey. “Je suis resté
immobile, l’œil fixé sur les inscriptions. Devant ce cimetière, entretenu avec amour par la fille
de celui qui avait offert à Simon un aller simple vers le bout du monde l’idée de ce livre m’est
venue. Dans ces pages reposeraient la blessure dont je n’avais jamais pu faire le deuil” (180,
emphasis added). According to Judith Herman, mourning is an important part of the healing
process (188). Because the loss was a family secret, it was impossible to mourn it. An impossible
mourning (“un deuil impossible”) over which the child had no control burdened the members of
his family and mysteriously permeated the atmosphere of his childhood. As an adult who has
progressed in his journey, the narrator is capable of facing the difficult but now possible task of
mourning. He mourns a wound that speaks of individual and collective history, a wound that is
pierced by points of memory and postmemory. He mourns for his brother, for the other deported children and for the legacy of shadows that occluded his childhood.

The photo has made a journey too---from an album buried in a storage trunk with a stuffed toy dog---testaments to one family’s private hell---to placement in a collective album that speaks with a public voice. It echoes the message embedded in Simon’s name: Hear. Listen.

**Dora Bruder**

Like Grimbert, Modiano is a child of the second generation. Unlike Grimbert, he and Dora are not blood relations, but he feels a connection to her. Like Modiano, Dora attended a boarding school. Like Modiano, she ran away from school and family when she was a teenager. Dora ran away during the winter of 1941-42. Modiano ran away during the winter of 1965. Throughout the book, he makes comparisons between his and Dora’s (probable) routes and experiences.

_Dora Bruder_ begins with the presence of absence, with Modiano’s reflections upon a missing person’s notice from a newspaper, _Paris-Soir_, dated Dec. 31, 1941. The missing person is a 15-year-old girl named Dora Bruder. Both Grimbert’s narrator and Modiano find initial traces of the missing person in spaces that contain objects from a time period that preceded their births. The *chien de peluche* is in a storage trunk, a receptacle that resembles the shape of a coffin. The missing person’s notice is in a newspaper from 1941. Both are buried in spaces that are not easily accessible. The young boy in _Un Secret_ cannot gain access to the storage room by himself; he must go with his mother. He has neither the key to the room nor the key to his prehistory. A newspaper from 1941 would not generally be out in the open; it would be stored in an archive and one would need to make a request to see it. Like buried trauma, both surface
belatedly and unexpectedly. Both the *chien de peluche* in *Un Secret* and the missing person’s notice in *Dora Bruder* bear witness to prior meaningful existences: to a small child, the previous owner of the *chien de peluche* and to a vanished adolescent, the subject of the printed notice. They are clues to secrets from the past that set off the narrator’s quests for missing stories about missing people.

Modiano approaches his task as a detective; he searches for clues. According to Laurie Wilson, Modiano “begins his investigation by looking through administrative documents, archives, even phone books” (178). *Dora Bruder* begins with Modiano’s discovery of the missing person’s notice in *Paris-Soir*: “Il y a huit ans, dans un vieux journal, *Paris-Soir*, qui datait du 31 décembre 1941, je suis tombé à la page trois sur une rubrique: ‘D’hier à aujourd’hui’. Au bas de celle-ci, j’ai lu: ‘PARIS On recherche une jeune fille, Dora Bruder, 15 ans, 1m55, visage ovale, yeux gris-marron, manteau sport gris, pull-over Bordeaux, jupe et chapeau bleu marine, chaussures sport marron. Adresser toutes indications à M. et Mme Bruder, 41 boulevard Ornano, Paris’” (23). These opening lines introduce the theme of the rubric. A rubric is a section of a newspaper or a heading of a column. It also means category or class. Various categories appear throughout the text. This rubric is “*d’hier à aujourd’hui*. “ According to the English translation by Joanna Kilmartin, the idiomatic translation of *d’hier à aujourd’hui* is *from day to day* (3). This connotes the usual, the commonplace. The literal translation of *d’hier à aujourd’hui* is *from yesterday to today*. Both meanings apply in *Dora Bruder*. A notice about a runaway adolescent falls within the rubric of comprehensible, explainable experience. Yet, the day to day in this context belies the extreme nature of the underlying story which will become more evident as the text progresses. The literal translation, *from yesterday to today*, figures in the structure of the text as a back and forth between time periods as well as a blending of time
periods. For example, for Modiano, the winter of 1942 (when Dora ran away) blends with the winter of 1965 (when he ran away). As such, "d'hier à aujourd'hui" functions as a theme which reflects the dilemma of a generation beset with a sense of belatedness.

The opening lines introduce the secret, the mystery that is tied up with the presence of absence. A missing person’s notice, by definition, conveys the presence of absence. This notice depicts Dora in ways that are both specific (height, shape of face, eye color, clothing worn) yet fairly general. It both reveals and conceals because the description could apply to a number of girls and its attention to surface appearance tells nothing about Dora’s particular story. The secret as well as the presence of absence frame the text; they will reappear at its conclusion.

**Points of memory, points of intersection, points of departure**

This missing person’s notice functions as a point of memory, a remnant of memory from the past that is preserved in print. In addition, it is a point of intersection between past and present and between memory and postmemory. Modiano begins the next chapter by reflecting upon the phrase, "d’hier à aujourd’hui": “D’hui à aujourd’hui. Avec le recul des années, les perspectives se brouillent pour moi, les hivers se mêlent l’un à l’autre. Celui de 1965 et celui de 1942” (26). Dora’s escape in 1942 recalls his own flight in 1965. However, because of his obsession with the Occupation, her situation does not simply remind him of his own. Instead, he blends time periods. He cannot separate his own past with the prehistory that preceded his birth even on a perceptual level.

The missing person’s notice becomes an indirect bequest across time. Initially directed to the general readership of *Paris Soir* during the winter of 1941-42, it is received many years later by Modiano, a member of a subsequent generation. Modiano’s reaction reflects his sense of
belatedness, for he responds, decades later, to a missing person’s announcement posted in the past. His encounter with the notice becomes a point of departure from which he begins his search. Modiano spends years of his life in the present trying to find traces of Dora’s story. Despite enormous difficulties he finds some information about Dora and her parents, Ernest and Cécile Bruder, such as their address in Paris, Dora’s date of birth and where she attended school.

**From the everyday to the extreme**

As he continues his search, the text moves from the everyday to the extreme. Rothberg’s analysis of the gradual movement from normal to inconceivable experience in Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après* illuminates a similar progression in *Dora Bruder*. *Auschwitz et après* opens with a description of an ordinary train station and gradually moves to a description of train station at Auschwitz. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, reality and words as signifiers of reality are thrown off kilter. For example, at the first train station, the words, *arrival* and *departure*, had clear meanings. Upon arrival, a person gets off the train. Upon departure, she gets on the train. However, there is no departure by train from Auschwitz. Furthermore, arrival at Auschwitz *means departure* from normal reality and often from life itself (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 141-145).

In *Dora Bruder*, a similar dynamic takes place through a gradual progression of categories from French to the Other and from ordinary to bizarre. The first document about Dora, the missing person’s notice, is positioned within the rubric of the day-to-day (*d’hier à aujourd’hui*). Except for the designation, *une jeune fille*, there is an absence of categories. The next document concerning Dora is her birth certificate. It classifies Dora as a female child.

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47 Wilson notes “an obsession with classification on an administrative level” during the *années noires* in France and she discusses Modiano’s focus upon exclusionary categories 182-83; 184-85.
Although Dora’s nationality is not on the birth certificate (she would automatically be considered French because she was born in France), the document includes information about her parents’ foreign origins. More information about Dora appears on the register of the boarding school of the Saint-Coeur-de-Marie where she’s classified as enfant légitime. Then Modiano introduces categories that are applied to people like Dora’s parents--categories that define those who are not quite legitimate. They are somewhat illegitimate, not because they were born out of wedlock, but because they were born outside of France. Ernest Bruder, who was born in Vienna, would have been considered to be “ex-Autrichien” and grouped with “les ressortissants du ‘Reich,’”” sent to “camps de ‘rassemblement’” where the men were divided into two categories: “suspects et non-suspects.” Modiano reflects, “On vous classe dans des catégories bizarres dont vous n’avez jamais entendu parler et qui ne correspondent pas à ce que vous êtes réellement. On vous convoque. On vous interne. Vous aimeriez bien comprendre pourquoi” (50). Categories have moved from explainable to incomprehensible; the words used to define individuals do not correspond to who they are. Furthermore, the increased use of categories that confuse meaning becomes the new reality. For example, in fall of 1941 Jews were required to register at the police station. Ernest and Cécile Bruder received the Jewish family dossier number 4901. Modiano reflects upon Ernest Bruder’s probable reaction to categorization: “Au fond, qu’est-ce qu’ils entendaient exactement par le mot ‘juif’? Pour lui [Ernest], il ne s’est même pas posé la question. Il avait l’habitude que l’administration le classe dans différentes catégories, et il l’acceptait, sans discuter. Manoeuvre. Ex-Autrichien. Légionnaire français. Non-suspect. Mutilé 100%. Prestataire étranger. Juif” (73-74). The categories accrued gradually over time; being categorized had become normalized. In this passage, Modiano gives each one equal weight. The addition of just one more category, juif, was not an abrupt change. As in Un Secret, where some members of
the Grinberg family did not perceive danger when they were required to register at the police station and to wear the star, Ernest did not perceive the danger of just one more category.

With time, categories become more threatening. Dora’s status is different: “Aux yeux de la police et des autorités de ce temps-là, elle était dans une situation doublement irrégulière: à la fois juive et mineure en cavale” (87). The presentation of Dora that appeared at the beginning of the book: an ordinary adolescent girl who is missing and later as an “enfant légitime” has changed. Now her status is “doubly irregular.” Ernest Bruder, now designated as wanted by the police, is arrested and sent to the transit camp at Drancy.

The missing person’s notice resurfaces within the context of categories that have moved from the quotidian to the extreme and from part of the mainstream to the Other. Modiano reproduces the entry of Ernest Bruder’s arrest on the police blotter. Then he reflects upon its connection to the initial missing person’s notice: “Un père essaye de retrouver sa fille, signale sa disparition dans un commissariat, et un avis de recherche est publié dans un journal du soir….Ceux-là même qui sont chargés de vous chercher et de vous retrouver établissent des fiches pour mieux vous faire disparaître ensuite --- définitivement” (103). Modiano creates conceptual dissonance by simultaneously holding on to contradictions. Those in charge of finding people make them disappear. A parent seeks help in locating his child and is arrested by the authorities who are supposed to help him.

From the individual to the collective

The use of categories also facilitates the movement from the individual to the individual as part of a collective. The book, which begins with Modiano’s search for Dora, expands to include people like Dora and her parents. For example, Modiano notes, “des adolescents de l’âge
de Dora ont été arrêtés…certaines plus jeunes, et leur famille” (75). A subsequent testimonial object, a grouping of letters, reflects this movement from the individual to the individual as part of a collective. The letters follow the resurfacing of the initial missing person’s notice in juxtaposition with Ernest Bruder’s arrest. These letters reveal the plight of individuals within the collective. The letters are requests to *le préfet de police* for the release of relatives incarcerated in Drancy or for information about these relatives.

Both testimonial objects, the notice in *Paris Soir* and the letters, are appeals from relatives who seek help in bringing home missing persons. The notice refers to one individual’s voluntary disappearance. These circumstances fall within the rubric of explainable experience: An adolescent runs away from boarding school. The circumstances surrounding the letters are not part of explainable experience. They concern people who did not leave home voluntarily; they were forcibly removed by the French police. The very guardians (*les gardiens de la paix*) who used to protect law-abiding people now incarcerate them, not because they committed crimes (a normal reason) but because they fall within certain categories: first “foreign Jews,” then simply, “Jews.” By placing a reference to the original missing person’s notice near the letters Modiano contrasts documents from two conflicting realities. Through this placement, Modiano simultaneously holds on to contradictions.

The letters, like the missing person’s notice, travel across time and space. The notice is addressed to the general readership of *Paris Soir* on Dec. 31, 1941. The letters are addressed to the Paris police prefect during the 1940’s. He does not answer them and does not even open most of them. They remain out of sight, buried in a mail sack until Modiano uncovers them. These cries, unheard and unheeded at the time of the trauma, are received and heard in another time and place.
The movement from the ordinary to the extreme, from the individual to the collective and from the past to the present gradually includes the reader. At the beginning of the text, the pronoun, *je*, predominates. It is an individual, Modiano, who accidentally finds the notice about Dora Bruder in *Paris Soir* and responds to it: “*Je suis tombé à la page trois…j’ai lu*” (23, emphasis added). This is *his* search, *his* detective work. Later, when he reflects upon Ernest Bruder’s situation, he uses the pronoun, *vous*. “On vous classe” (50). *Vous* refers to Ernest Bruder as an individual and to others like him. However, *vous* can also be interpreted as a form of general address that includes the reader. As a result of his detective work that began with the notice, he uncovers more documents such as the letters, and brings them to light for the present day collective public: “Ceux à qui elles étaient adressées n’ont pas voulu en tenir compte et maintenant, c’est nous, qui n’étions pas encore nés à cette époque, qui en sommes les destinataires et les gardiens” (105). Now he directly addresses and includes the reader by using the pronoun, *nous*. The letters become bequests across time and space from one generation to another. The reader becomes both a recipient (*un destinataire*) and a participant (*un gardien*). By including the reader as recipient and guardian, Modiano invites others to join his quest to save fragments of the past from oblivion.

**Intertextuality**

This address to the reader (“*C’est nous…qui en sommes les destinataires et les gardiens*”) occurs within the context of a reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”:

Maintenant que se sont écoulés près de soixante ans, ces archives vont peu à peu livrer leurs secrets. La Préfecture de police de l’Occupation n’est plus qu’une grande caserne spectrale au bord de la Seine. Elle nous apparaît, au moment où
nous évoquons le passé, un peu comme la maison Usher….Toutes ces dizaines de milliers de procès-verbaux ont été détruites et on ne connaîtra jamais les noms des ‘agents capteurs’. Mais il reste, dans les archives, des centaines et des centaines de lettres adressées au préfet de police de l’époque et auxquelles il n’a jamais répondu. Elles ont été là pendant plus d’un demi-siècle, comme des sacs de courrier oubliés au fond du hangar d’une lointaine étape de l’Aéropostale. Aujourd’hui nous pouvons les lire. Ceux à qui elles étaient adressées n’ont pas voulu en tenir compte et maintenant c’est nous, qui n’étions pas encore nés à cette époque, qui en sommes les destinataires et les gardiens. (104-105)

Modiano’s discovery of the letters resonates with Poe’s short story. A letter summons the narrator to visit his friend at the mysterious House of Usher. During his visit, the friend’s twin sister dies and they bury her in the family vault. However, she only appeared to be dead. In the days and nights that follow she cries out to her brother. However, he does not heed her cries until she claws her way out of the tomb. When she appears before him, still wrapped in her shroud, she cries out again. Her brother dies from terror. The visitor escapes just before the building collapses into fragments. Finally he watches as the waters of the adjacent tarn “close silently over the House of Usher” (Poe 212).

The intertextual interplay underscores themes of secrecy, forgetfulness, witnessing as well as the belated and fragmented nature of trauma. Both the police station and the House of Usher are buildings that hide secrets. Like the woman in Poe’s story who cries out for her own release, the letters plead for the release of imprisoned relatives, but the prefect never answers them. Modiano’s use of an abandoned mail sack as a metaphor recalls the shroud in “The House of Usher” and the silent tarn resembles the waters of Lethe. Although the fragments of the House
of Usher disappear, the escaped visitor carries the story. The guardians of abandoned documents, who Modiano calls *les sentinelles d’oubli*, intended to silence and obliterate these fragments of memory. However, the buried letters cry out belatedly and are heard when Modiano reads them, resituates them in his book and shares them with his readers.

Modiano presents seven fragments of letters. A few of them follow:

“Monsieur le Préfet de Police

J’ai l’honneur de solliciter de votre haute bienveillance et de votre générosité les renseignements concernant ma fille, Mme Jacques Lévy, née Violette Joël, arrêtée vers le 10 septembre dernier, alors qu’elle tentait de franchir la ligne de démarcation sans Porter l’étoile réglementaire. Elle était accompagnée de son fils, Jean Lévy, âgé de 8 ans et demi…” (105-106)

“Monsieur le Préfet

Je vous serais infiniment obligé de bien vouloir examiner le cas que je viens vous présenter: mes parents assez âgés, malades, venant d’être pris en tant que juifs et nous restons seules, ma petite soeur, Marie Grosman 15 ans ½, juive française, ayant la carte d’identité française no 1594936 série B et moi-même Jeannette Grosman, également juive française, 19 ans, ayant la carte d’identité française no 924247 série B…” (106)
“Monsieur le directeur

Excusez-moi, si je me permets de m’adresser à vous, mais voici mon cas: le 16 juillet 1942, à 4 h du matin, on est venu chercher mon mari et comme ma fille pleurait, on l’a prise aussi.

Elle se nomme Paulette Gothelf, âgée de 14 ans ½ née le 19 novembre 1927 à Paris dans le 12e et elle est française…” (106).

Unlike the missing person’s notice for Dora Bruder, the letters do not fall under the rubric of *d’hier à aujourd’hui*. Yet the semblance of day-to-day normality remains in their form. They adhere to accepted, formal conventions of letter writing. This normal framework, however, contains an abnormal reality: a child is arrested for crying; two young girls must fend for themselves as well as plead for their aged, sick parents. None of the writers of the letters dares to challenge this new reality; the consequences would be futile or worse. So they word their pleas as though this new reality made sense. For example, the writer of the first letter says that her daughter was arrested with her eight-year-old son when she tried to cross the demarcation line without wearing her star. The sentence implies a logical cause and effect: she concealed her identity; therefore she was arrested. However, if she had worn her star, she would have been arrested too, like Hannah Grinberg in *Un Secret*. Hannah tried to cross the demarcation line, revealed her identity and was promptly arrested and deported with her eight-year-old son.

The use of categories in this grouping of letters reflects the simultaneous presence and disjunction of conflicting realities. For example, Jeanette Grosman refers to an identity that includes her as part of the mainstream (ayant la carte d’identité française) as well as a classification that puts her outside of it (juive-française). In addition, there are other letters where
relatives cling futilely to remnants of a former reality….a time when French nationality offered some degree of protection: “Elle [sa fille] se nomme Paulette Gothelf... et elle est française…” (106) and from letters not reproduced here: “… mon neveu Albert Graudens, de nationalité française…” (105), “mon petit-fils Michaël Rubin, 3 ans, français, de mère française interné à Drancy avec sa mère” (106).

Photographs

Like the missing person’s notice and other archives, photographs are part of Modiano’s detective work. Dora’s photograph is evidence that she existed. Moreover, it is evidence that is particularly close to the referent. The missing person’s notice describes her general appearance, the birth certificate establishes her date and place of birth, but the photograph brings her body into focus.

Modiano describes photographs in two places…in chapter 6 and in chapter 18. His treatment and placement of these descriptions correspond with phases of his journey and also propel the text forward to new stages. In chapters 1-5, Modiano concentrates upon the individual, Dora, and her family. Most of this is information that predates the Holocaust such as Dora’s birth certificate and school records, Ernest Bruder’s early history and the record of Ernest and Cécile Bruder’s marriage.

48 See Wilson 180. “Each of these letters testifies to the fact that Jewish children, even of French nationality…were imprisoned by the French police.”
49 According to Eakin, “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (qtd in Adams xv). On Modiano’s use of photographs as evidence, see Warehime 312.
50 According to Barthes, “a specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents)….It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb” (Camera Lucida 5-6).
51 There are 26 chapters in Dora Bruder. They are not numbered.
Chapter six begins: “Et les années se sont écoulées, porte de Clignancourt jusqu’à la guerre. Je ne sais rien d’eux, au cours de ces années” (44). He has found out little about what happened to them during this time period, but he has found clues in the form of photographs: “Quelques photos de cette époque” (44). He describes eight photographs. They include one of Ernest and Cécile on their wedding day as well as photos of Dora at different ages ranging from about age 2 to age 13 or 14 alone or with her mother or with both of her parents. These photos represent traces of Dora’s childhood such as school events and summer days with her parents. These are normal times, normal events before the Occupation.

The opening sentence, “et les années se sont écoulées, porte de Clignancourt jusqu’à la guerre,” contains both continuity and rupture. It conveys the relative peacefulness of these years with the use of écouter as well as their abrupt end (jusqu’à la guerre). Modiano’s quest is not just to find Dora Bruder, but to locate and enter into the time period(s) in which she lived. At this point in the text he tries to recover the time period that preceded the Occupation. Photographs are particularly useful in this endeavor because, according to Adams, looking at a photograph can confuse temporality (Adams 144). Modiano’s use of the present tense when describing these photos reflects a merging of temporalities.

Modiano begins to enter himself into the pre-war time period by referring to a season (summer) and not specifying the year. At the end of chapter 6, he completes his description of the final photograph (of Dora at age 9) by referring to light and shadow in the photo: “Ces ombres et ces taches de soleil sont celles d’un jour d’été” (46). The next chapter begins: “Il y a d’autres journées d’été dans le quartier Clignancourt” (47). Thus, Modiano uses the season, summer, to make a transition from the photographs of Dora to the pre-war atmosphere of the area where she lived. It was, he says, more like a village than part of a city: “Petite, elle a dû
jouer dans le square Clignancourt. Le quartier, par moments, ressemblait à un village. Le soir, les voisins disposaient des chaises sur les trottoirs et bavardaient entre eux. On allait boire une limonade à la terrasse d’un café. Quelquefois, des hommes, dont on ne savait pas si c’étaient de vrais chevriers ou des forains, passaient avec quelques chèvres et vendaient un grand verre de lait pour dix sous. La mousse vous faisait une moustache blanche” (47). Modiano, the detective, uses his research about this pre-war neighborhood to imagine Dora’s activities and location. His use of the past tense of devoir indicates his use of deductive reasoning. In the scene that he constructs, Modiano gradually moves from a specific individual (Dora) to the more general category of the neighbors. All of them lived in this place at that time. Then he introduces pronouns that are both more general and more inclusive. On and vous, which refer to people who lived or worked in this place at that time, could also apply to Modiano and the reader. Therefore, via this gradual progression from elle to les voisins to on and vous, Modiano moves himself, and possibly the reader as well, into a scene from the past. It is a time period that includes simple pleasures such as socializing with neighbors while drinking lemonade or a glass of goat’s milk.

Modiano’s entrance into the world before the Occupation does not last for long. He recalls other photographs that he had seen of that area when he was about Dora’s age:

Vers quatorze ans, ce terrain vague m’avait frappé. J’ai cru le reconnaître sur deux ou trois photos, prises l’hiver: une sorte d’esplanade où l’on voit passer un autobus. Un camion est à l’arrêt, on dirait pour toujours. Un champ de neige au bord duquel attendent une roulette et un cheval noir. Et, tout au fond, la masse brumeuse des immeubles….Je me souviens que pour la première fois, j’avais ressenti le vide que l’on éprouve devant ce qui a été détruit, rasé net. Je ne connaissais pas encore l’existence de Dora Bruder. Peut-être – mais j’en suis sûr
– s’est-elle promenée là, dans cette zone qui m’évoque les rendez-vous d’amour secrets, les pauvres bonheurs perdus. Il flottait encore par ici des souvenirs de campagne, les rues s’appelaient: allée du Puits, allée du Métro, allée des Peupliers, impasse des Chiens. (47-48)

The chapter ends here with the simultaneous presence of the past and its absence. The photograph freezes a moment in time from before the Occupation. Modiano underscores this quality through his use of present tenses: one sees a bus pass, a truck is at a standstill, the black horse is waiting. Yet, he expresses the sensations he experienced while looking at the photograph in the past perfect tense (“j’avais ressenti le vide”). He knows that the time period before the Occupation is gone (“détruit, rasé net”). However, his adolescence and Dora’s almost touch in this passage. “Les pauvres bonheurs perdus” refers to Modiano’s past and his memories of secret meetings with lovers, but the phrase resonates with simple, lost pleasures of another, more innocent time, when Dora’s neighbors gathered outside in the evening.

Through the use of these photographs Modiano both enters and leaves the time period just prior to the Occupation. This facilitates a transition to the next stage of his journey. The next chapter begins with a document that records Dora’s enrollment at a Catholic boarding school in 1940 and her flight from the school in 1941. Dora’s enrollment in the boarding school in May, 1940 coincides with a changing, more sinister reality: In the fall of 1939 ex-Austrian men were assembled in camps and recategorized into two groups, suspect and non-suspect. In May, 1940 ex-Austrian women were interned. Modiano asks questions: Was Ernest Bruder amongst them? Was Cécile Bruder? By posing these questions he situates individual upheaval within collective upheaval. Like the Grinberg family in Un Secret, the Bruders are enmeshed in collective historical trauma. Like the Grinberg’s, the Bruder family unit falters as society’s structure falls
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apart. They enroll their daughter in a Catholic boarding school, possibly to protect her from encroaching danger, but she runs away. Ernest Bruder is arrested and Cécile Bruder is reduced to abject poverty. Dora returns to her mother’s home. Modiano is not sure whether the authorities picked her up or whether she returned voluntarily. Later, she runs away again. This time the police find her and send her to Drancy where she finds Ernest Bruder: a family reunion that, in keeping with a distorted reality, results in their final disappearance; father and daughter are deported, together, to Auschwitz.

Modiano’s next (and last) reference to a photograph of Dora Bruder falls clearly within the context of the changed reality of the Occupation. He is certain that this photo was taken either in 1941 when she was enrolled at the boarding school or in the spring of 1942 when she returned to her mother’s home. It represents a historical break with the pre-war photos and Modiano’s treatment of this photograph reflects this juncture in time:

J’ai pu obtenir il y a quelques mois une photo de Dora Bruder qui tranche sur celles que j’avais déjà rassemblées. Sans doute la dernière qui a été prise d’elle. Son visage et son allure n’ont plus rien d’enfance qui se reflétait dans toutes les photos précédentes à travers le regard, la rondeur des joues, la robe blanche d’un jour de distribution des prix…. Je ne sais pas à quelle date a été prise cette photo. Certainement en 1941, l’année où Dora était pensionnaire au Saint-Coeur-de-Marie, ou bien au début du printemps 1942, quand elle est revenue, après sa fugue de décembre, boulevard Ornano.

Elle est en compagnie de sa mère et de sa grand-mère maternelle. Les trois femmes sont côte à côte, la grand-mère entre Cécile Bruder et Dora. Cécile Bruder porte une robe noire et les cheveux courts, la grand-mère une robe à fleurs.
Les deux femmes ne sourient pas. Dora est vêtue d’une robe noire – ou bleu marine – et d’une blouse à col blanc, mais cela pourrait être aussi un gilet et une jupe – la photo n’est pas assez nette pour s’en rendre compte. Elle porte des bas et des chaussures à brides. Ses cheveux mi-long sont presque jusqu’aux épaules et sont ramenés en arrière par un serre-tête, son bras gauche est le long du corps, avec les doigts de la main gauche repliés et le bras droit caché par sa grand-mère. *Elle tient la tête haute, ses yeux sont graves, mais il flotte sur ses lèvres l’amorce d’un sourire. Et cela donne à son visage une expression de douceur triste et de défi.* Les trois femmes sont debout devant le mur. Le sol est dallé, comme le couloir d’un lieu public. Qui a bien pu prendre cette photo? Ernest Bruder? Et s’il ne figure pas sur cette photo, cela veut-il dire qu’il a déjà été arrêté? En tout cas, il semble que les trois femmes aient revêtu des habits du dimanche, face à cet objectif anonyme. (109-110 emphasis added)

His use of the verb *trancher* in the first sentence is significant. In her English translation of *Dora Bruder*, Joanna Kirkpatrick’s translates *trancher sur* as *in complete contrast to* (74). However, other meanings of *trancher* include *to stand out, to slice* and *to cut (off).* In the previous grouping of photos Modiano makes no references to specific years. In this passage he focuses upon the years 1941 and 1942 and their connection to events in Dora’s life. The historical rupture from pre-war Paris to occupied Paris corresponds to major breaks in Dora’s life: her enrollment in the boarding school, her *fugue* and possibly her father’s arrest. In addition, Modiano’s focus upon this time period is evident in his interpretation of the photograph which contrasts with his treatment of the first group of photographs.
In the first grouping of photographs (in chapter 6), Modiano describes but does not interpret. Some of these descriptions are brief such as the following: “Une photo avec leur fille Dora. Ils sont assis, Dora debout entre eux: elle n’a pas plus de deux ans” (44). Others are somewhat longer and include more details such as: “Une photo de Dora, prise certainement à l’occasion d’une distribution des prix. Elle a douze ans, environ, elle porte une robe et des socquettes blanches. Elle tient dans la main droite un livre. Ses cheveux sont entourés d’une petite couronne dont on dirait que ce sont des fleurs blanches. Elle a posé sa main gauche sur le rebord d’un grand cube blanc ornementé de barres noires aux motifs géométriques, et ce cube blanc doit être là pour le décor” (44-45). Modiano’s tone is objective. He describes Dora’s and her parents’ poses, estimates Dora’s age and notes what she wears. In his treatment of the last photograph of Dora (in chapter 18) the descriptive content is much more extensive. In chapter 18, he contrasts the last photograph with the earlier photographs in terms of a lost and more innocent time: childhood before the Occupation. “Son visage et son allure n’ont plus rien d’enfance qui se reflétait dans toutes les photos précédentes à travers le regard, la rondeur des joues, la robe blanche d’un jour de distribution des prix” (110). Furthermore, his tone, even when referring to previous photographs, becomes less objective. It is upon retrospection that he notes the air of childhood that shines through (se reflétait) earlier photos. He does not mention this in his original descriptions.

Modiano’s interpretation of the final photograph includes attention to Dora’s facial expression. Modiano does not reproduce the photographs in the French edition; he writes about them. Therefore, the reader sees them through Modiano’s description and interpretation. However, the photograph of Dora with her parents appears in Klarsfeld’s French Children of the
In addition, several of the photographs, including the final photo (the one with Dora and her mother and grandmother) appear in Joanna Kirkpatrick’s English translation of *Dora Bruder*. Dora’s chin is raised and she does seem to have a slight smile. However, other viewers might not consider her eyes to be serious or her expression to be sad and defiant. In his interpretation, Modiano adds context to content. Because he knows the historical context of the period as well as some of the events that took place or could have taken place in Dora’s life during that time, he inserts their effects upon one of the subjects of the photograph.

Modiano’s response to this photograph recalls Roland Barthes’ reaction to the photograph of his mother in the Winter Garden. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes relates how he searched for his mother’s essence among many photographs (66). He finally found “the truth of the face [he] had loved” in the Winter Garden photograph (67). Barthes discusses but does not reproduce the Winter Garden photo because others would not see what he sees: “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; …at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound” (73). There is a similarity in Modiano’s subjective response to the last photograph of Dora. He sees a part of Dora’s character-- her defiance. He knows about her rebellious nature, not from the photograph, but from his research. Furthermore, her defiance is a quality that touches Modiano because he, too, was a defiant adolescent who ran away. At the beginning of the passage, Modiano says that this photo of Dora is the one “*qui tranche.*” This is the photo that cuts and the defiance and sadness that he reads into it is the *punctum* that pierces him. Through this photograph Modiano

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52 It was Klarsfeld who located this photograph and made it available to Modiano. For a discussion of the relationship between Klarsfeld’s research and Modiano’s see Morris, “*Avec Klarsfeld contre l’oubli*: Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*.”

53 Hirsch discusses context and content in “family pictures connected to the Holocaust” (20). See *Family Frames* 17-40.
connects across time to an adolescent who resembled him through a common characteristic (defiance) and experience (running away). His perceptions about time and this photograph differ from his perceptions about time and the previous group of photos. This changed perspective about time will propel his journey in a different direction.

Modiano ends his description of the first group of photographs with his thoughts about the simultaneous presence and absence of the past. He recalls several photographs that freeze moments in time from before the Occupation and says: “Je me souviens que pour la première fois, j’avais ressenti le vide que l’on éprouve devant ce qui a été détruit, rasé net. Je ne connaissais pas encore l’existence de Dora Bruder. Peut-être – mais j’en suis sûr – s’est-elle promenée là, dans cette zone qui m’évoque les rendez-vous d’amour secrets, les pauvres bonheurs perdus. Il flottait encore par ici des souvenirs de campagne, les rues s’appelaient: allée du Puits, allée du Métro, allée des Peupliers, impasse des Chiens” (48). He ends his discussion of the final photo of Dora a similar note: “Des photos comme il en existe dans toutes les familles. Le temps de la photo, ils étaient protégés quelques secondes et ces secondes sont devenues une éternité” (111). This photo freezes a moment in time from the Occupation. It, too, holds the simultaneity of presence and absence. Yet, there appears to be a change in the way in which Modiano treats the simultaneity of presence and absence in the photograph.

In the first excerpt he derives his thoughts about absence and presence from his memories of photographs of pre-war Paris; the photographs, themselves, are absent. His thoughts about these photographs veer towards emptiness (une sensation de vide) while his thoughts about what remains from the past center on the places where the photos were taken. In the second excerpt, the photograph, itself, is present and Modiano focuses solely upon it and upon its capacity to transform a few seconds into an eternity. Marianne Hirsch’s insights about photography and
postmemory elucidate Modiano’s reaction to the final photograph of Dora. According to Hirsch, the photograph oscillates between life and death (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 21). This quality of hovering between life and death is particularly poignant in the Holocaust photograph because the viewer knows the context of the content. The photograph of Dora with her mother and grandmother is an ordinary photo of three generations of women posing for the camera (“des photos comme il en existe dans toutes les familles”). It is probably the last one taken of Dora before her deportation and murder. Modiano uses backshadowing (looking backwards with knowledge of what is to come). Modiano knows what will happen and what has happened. The normality of this family photograph preserved in this moment in time evokes the inconceivable horror of what awaits/has befallen this family. The continuity of generations will be/has been broken and the use of the verb trancher underscores the piercing quality of that knowledge.

Just after his thoughts about time and the last photo of Dora with her mother and grandmother, he ponders, “On se demande pourquoi la foudre les a frappés plutôt que d’autres. Pendant que j’écris ces lignes, je pense brusquement à quelques-uns de ceux qui faisaient le même métier que moi” (111). Modiano then proceeds to write, not about his contemporaries, but about writers who lived during the time of the Occupation. His special connection to the photograph of Dora, who resembles Modiano as an adolescent, leads to connections to men who lived during Dora’s lifetime who resemble the adult Modiano through their vocation. Moreover, it is through the act of writing that he thinks about writers from the past. In addition, he uses the

54 In their discussion of pre-Holocaust photographs from Eastern Europe, Hirsch and Spitzer analyze backshadowing as it relates to the “disjunction between incommensurable temporalities of then and now.” See “Incongruous Images: Before, During and After the Holocaust” 19-20.
55 See also Barthes’ discussion of the effect of the anterior future in historical photographs: “This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake” (*Camera Lucida* 96).
words *foudre* and *frappé* in reference to Dora’s family and *brusquement* in connection with his own thought processes while writing. *Foudre* and *frapper* are strong words that convey sudden shock and destruction. *Brusquement* conveys a milder, but still shock-like, jarring quality. Modiano’s juxtaposition of *foudre*, *frappé* and *brusquement* in this context underscores trauma’s capacity to reverberate across time and generations.

Modiano discusses several writers who lived and wrote during the Occupation: Friedo Lampe, Felix Hartlaub, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Albert Sciaky and Robert Desnos. Oscillation between life and death now joins with the theme of *d’hier à aujourd’hui* that Modiano introduced at the beginning of *Dora Bruder* and which runs throughout the text. Earlier, he wrote about an oscillation between the times of Dora’s *fugue* in 1941-42 and his own in 1965: “D’hui à aujourd’hui. Avec le recul des années, les perspectives se brouillent pour moi, les hivers se mêlent l’un à l’autre. Celui de 1965 et celui de 1942” (26). Now he moves into an oscillation between his time and experiences as a writer and the work and experiences of Lampe, Hartlaub, Gilbert-Lecomte, Sciaky and Desnos. Furthermore he links his life with their deaths through a specific year. The beginning of his lifeline touches the end of theirs via the year, 1945:

“Beaucoup d’amis que je n’ai pas connus ont disparu en 1945, l’année de ma naissance” (116).

This is a juncture in time that coincides with the end of World War II. It marks a radical break in the history of the 20th century. It separates an age of catastrophe from the post-war era. Modiano is on the other side of this historical divide. Modiano’s personal timeline, like those of the writers,  

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56 Both German writers, Friedo Lampe and Felix Hartlaub, suffered under the Nazi regime. Although Lampe was indifferent to politics, the Nazis burned his novel, *Au Bord de la nuit*. Hartlaub was a historian. He was conscripted into the German army, and according to Modiano, he abhorred the uniform that he had to wear. Modiano admired a translated excerpt, entitled “Notes et impressions” (from Hartlaub’s work, *Von Unten Gesehen*) in which Hartlaub describes the atmosphere of Paris during his nocturnal wanderings.

Roger Gilbert-Lecomte was an avant garde poet and one of the founders of the group and magazine, *Le Grand jeu*. He was associated with the surrealist movement. Albert Sciaky wrote *Ce bon temps*, a novel that was published in 1938 under the pseudonym of François Vernet. Sciaky belonged to the French Resistance. The great surrealist poet, Robert Desnos, was also a member of the French Resistance. Both Sciaky and Desnos were Jewish.
intersects with a crucial moment in History. However, Modiano’s history does not intersect with theirs. Albert Sciaky was deported in July 1944, shortly before the Liberation of Paris in August, 1944; he died at Dachau in March 1945. Robert Desnos was imprisoned at Theresienstadt and died of typhoid in May 1945. Friedo Lampe and Felix Hartlaub died in Germany in 1945. These writers just missed surviving. Patrick Modiano was born in July, 1945. He just missed knowing them. They almost touch, but not quite.

Yet, he insists that they are his friends. The paradoxical nature of Modiano’s statement, “beaucoup d’amis que je n’ai pas connus ont disparu en 1945, l’année de ma naissance,” resembles the opening sentence of Un Secret: “Fils unique, j’ai longtemps eu un frère” (Grimbert 11). The boy in Un Secret was an only child who had a brother. Modiano is friends with people he never knew and who never knew him. Like Grimbert, Modiano feels kinship with individuals who perished during World War II. Like the older brother in Un Secret, the deceased writers are invisible but dominant presences. Modiano’s sense of belatedness vis à vis these writers extends to his attitude towards his own work as a writer. For example, his first novel, La Place de l’Étoile was published in 1968. Later he discovered that Robert Desnos had written a volume entitled La Place de l’Étoile. It had been published posthumously during that critical division in time, 1945. Modiano believes that he has committed theft. “Je lui avais volé, bien involontairement, son titre” (117). He was born too late to legitimately conceive of the title of his personal creative endeavor.

In both Un Secret and Dora Bruder the narrators diminish themselves and their experiences compared to invisible presences. Unlike the sickly boy in Un Secret, his older brother is strong and magnificent (glorieux). When Modiano contrasts his own experiences with those of the writers, he concludes that his own painful experiences were merely minor problems
However, Modiano’s sense of the past in this context is somewhat different from Grimbert’s. Grimbert uses the past perfect tense (j’avais eu un frère) which places the condition of having a brother in a past that has happened and is over: I had a brother. Modiano’s placement of the writers in relation to his own present is less clear. He uses the simple past to indicate that they disappeared and that he didn’t know them. However he does not place the condition of friendship in the past. The state of friendship exists in the present. This paradox is consistent with Modiano’s tendency to blur the boundaries between past and present. On one level he knows that they are dead; on another level he feels connected to them in a way that transcends time.

**Dora et l’étoile**

During the next stage of Modiano’s journey he focuses upon the last months of Dora’s life, June 15, 1942 – September 18, 1942. Through his detective work he locates several documents that help him to sketch out her trajectory. They include a memo, dated 17 June 1942, to Mlle Salomon, who worked for the Union Générale des Israélites de France and the 1942 register of women at the Tourelles prison in Paris. From the memo to Mlle Salomon, he learns that she ran away a second time after April, 1942, was picked up by the French police on June 15th and sent to the Tourelles prison on June 19th. The Tourelles register for 1942 indicates that Dora arrived at Tourelles on June 19th and on August 13th she was transferred to the Drancy transit camp. Dora was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on September 18, 1942. This is sparse information that does not relate Dora’s actual experiences.

Modiano reconstructs what might have been her experience by situating these bits of information that he has within the collective. For example, through his research he learned that
on the day that Dora was transferred from the Tourelles prison to Drancy, there were enough buses for every prisoner to have a seat (165). So he concludes that Dora had a seat on the bus: “Dora comme toutes les autres” (165). He groups Dora within categories and describes the fate of those who fit within those categories. For example, he reproduces a directive that was issued on June 6, 1942, shortly before Dora was arrested. It states that any Jew in infraction of various laws was to be sent to the police depot (131-32). Infractions included using a telephone, owning a bicycle or failure to wear the yellow star. Dora, like hundreds of other adolescents, might have been picked up for an infraction. “Des centaines d’adolescents comme Dora furent arrêtés dans la rue “ (132). He names individuals who crossed paths with Dora on specific dates such as the five girls, all about her age, who were admitted to the Tourelles prison on June 19th. In addition he incorporates information, including some documents about others imprisoned at Tourelles. However, does he find Dora? More specifically, does he find the Dora who he saw in the last photograph? He does not. Yet, he finds a trace of Dora among some of the individuals about whom he writes in this section of the text. There are several who resemble Dora via a quality that moved Modiano in the last photograph. The last photo touched Modiano because of Dora’s look of defiance, a characteristic that he shares with her, a characteristic that links them across time and space. Several of the young women about whom he writes committed acts of defiance: they refused to wear the star or they subverted its meaning. Furthermore, these acts of defiance committed in 1942 relate to Modiano’s book, *La Place de l’Étoile*, creating another link between Modiano and these young women, and through them, to Dora.

At the end of the previous chapter (chapter 18), Modiano writes about the title of his first published novel *La Place de l’Étoile*. Chapter 19 begins with a document, the note to Mlle Salomon that indicates that Dora Bruder was picked up by the police on June 15, 1942. Then he
wonders how and why she might have been apprehended. He notes that as of June 7th Jews were required to wear the yellow star. He wonders whether Dora wore a star, and if not, whether she had been arrested because of that infraction. He concludes that she probably had not worn the star because of her rebellious nature and because she was on the run during the time that the decree was announced on June 7th.

There are unstated connections between Modiano’s assertion about Dora’s probable refusal to place the yellow star imprinted with the word, *juif*, upon her body in June 1942 and Modiano’s first novel. The title, *La Place de l’Étoile*, refers to both the Parisian landmark and the place over the heart where Jews were required to wear the Star of David during the Occupation. According to Alan Morris, Modiano examines Jewish identity in *La Place de l’Étoile*. The main character, Raphael Shlemilovitch, is a composite of Jewish stereotypes (Morris. *Patrick Modiano*, 1996 14). In *La Place de l’Étoile*, Modiano uses irony to expose and challenge these stereotypes. The girls about whom Modiano writes in *Dora Bruder* challenge the sign that represents these stereotypes through their actions.

Seventeen-year-old Louise was a student who was preparing for her baccalaureate examination when she tried to evade the law that required her to wear the yellow star. Modiano writes nothing about Louise Jacobson in his own prose. Instead, he reproduces a police report dated September 1, 1942. Like the missing person’s notice and the letters, it was written by and addressed to people who lived during the Occupation (“Les inspecteurs Curinier et Lasalle à Monsieur le Commissaire principal, chef de la Brigade Spéciale” 133). This time, the voices are those of collaborators. An excerpt follows:

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57 Modiano does not give Louise Jacobson’s age, but Klarsfeld does. See Klarsfeld, *French Children* 827.
Arrêtée ce jour vers quatorze heures, au domicile de sa mère, dans les circonstances suivantes: Alors que nous procédions à une visite domiciliaire au lieu sus-indiqué, la jeune Jacobson est entrée chez elle et nous avons remarqué qu’elle ne portait pas l’insigne propre aux juifs ainsi qu’il est prescrit par une ordonnance allemande. Elle nous a déclaré être partie de chez elle à huit heures trente minutes et être allée à un cours de préparation au baccalauréat au Lycée Henri-IV, rue Clovis. Par ailleurs, des voisins de cette jeune personne nous ont déclaré que cette jeune personne sortait souvent de chez elle sans cet insigne.

(133-34)

The document was meant to be destroyed like most of the other records, but it escaped oblivion by accident. By resituating the police report from 1942 within his text in 1999, Modiano allows the document to bear witness across time to different recipients. Rothberg’s theory of traumatic realism is helpful in elucidating the document’s impact in this context. Modiano juxtaposes the nature of the offense with the consequences. A seventeen-year-old girl does not wear the yellow star; therefore she is arrested and sent to her death. The individual does not mark her body with a sign; therefore the body is destroyed. Furthermore, Modiano juxtaposes conflicting realities across time: the reality of the collaborators in 1942 with the reality of the present day reader. For the writers of the document, Messieurs Curinier and Lasalle, the cause and effect make sense. However, for the recipients across time (Modiano and his readers) it does not make sense. When the reader tries to hold cause and effect simultaneously in her mind, the juxtaposition creates conceptual dissonance. In addition, Modiano creates a chain that is similar to the chains that Rothberg discusses in *Traumatic Realism*. For example, Rothberg relates an incident in Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après* where a little girl receives a doll as a present at a Christmas celebration. The
doll had originally belonged to another little girl who was gassed upon arrival at Auschwitz. Rothberg describes the doll’s trajectory through the camp as a chain of contamination that connects normality and extremity (Rothberg 152-153). The chain that involves Louise Jacobson reflects the interplay of place on the body and placement in space. Failure to place the identifying sign on the body leads to the body’s displacement and destruction. The chain begins with a girl, Louise Jacobson, studying for her baccalaureate at a lycée (a normal condition in a normal place) and ends with anonymous ashes at Auschwitz. Intermediate links in the chain progress gradually along a path that leads further and further away from normal places and circumstances: Lycée Henri-IV …..home…..Fresnes prison …..Drancy …..Beaune-la Rolande ….Drancy……convoy #48…..Auschwitz. This, too, is a chain of contamination that implicates others along its path such as the police, the neighbors and various unnamed bureaucrats who sign documents. In Delbo’s Auschwitz et après, the first girl’s murder would have been consigned to oblivion, but Delbo saw her and she survived to tell the story. Like Delbo, the document survives to bear witness across time.

Dora Bruder may have encountered Tamara Isserlis at the Tourelles prison in June 1942. Like Louise Jacobson, Tamara Isserlis refused to be defined by a designated category. Louise evaded the sign; Tamara subverted it. Modiano writes, “Tamara Isserlis. Elle avait vingt-quatre ans. Une étudiante en médecine. Elle avait été arrêtée au métro Cluny pour avoir porté ‘sous l’étoile de David le drapeau français’. Sa carte d’identité, que l’on a retrouvée, indique qu’elle habitait 10 rue de Buzenval à Saint-Cloud. Elle avait le visage ovale, les cheveux châtain blond

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58 Modiano does not include all of this information in Dora Bruder. Some of it is from Klarsfeld: “Imprisoned in Fresnes, the Parisian prison, on September 1, 1942, then in Drancy, Beaune-la-Rolande, then Drancy again, Louise was deported to Auschwitz on convoy 48 of February 13, 1943, where she was murdered like most on that convoy” (French Children 827).
59 In Traumatic Realism, Rothberg discusses the “accidental survival” of evidence in this incident: “the narrator has by chance seen the bear’s original owner, an accident that ensures that the chain of evidence leading from murder to celebration will survive” (153).
et les yeux noirs” (144). Tamara Isserlis marks her own body with a sign that she chooses and she creates layers of meaning. By placing the French flag between her body (and even closer to her heart) and the Star of David, she insists upon her identity as a French citizen.

Tamara’s juxtaposition of the French flag and the Star of David recalls an anecdote from the opening pages of Modiano’s *La Place de l’Étoile*: “Au mois de juin 1942, un officier allemand s’avance vers un jeune homme et lui dit: ‘Pardon, monsieur, où se trouve la place de l’Étoile?’ Le jeune homme désigne le côté gauche de sa poitrine” (Modiano. *La Place de l’Étoile* 11). The anecdote juxtaposes signs upon a place on the body with an important landmark. Wilson cites Nettlebeck and Hueston’s interpretation of this anecdote: “La place de l’É(é)toile’’ (sic) is thus at once ‘ce lieu central à Paris qui consacre le triomphe d’une France éternelle, le symbole d’un non-lieu, sur la poitrine d’un people apatride,’ and ‘le centre géographique des activités les plus folles de l’Occupation.’ It simultaneously represents ‘le moment le plus scandaleux de l’Histoire française de ce siècle,’ and ‘l’une des grandes tragédies de l’Histoire juive,’ and thus the dilemma of Jewish identity in France” (Nettelbeck and Hueston, *Pièces* 14 qtd in Wilson 158). By conflating the place and the sign imposed upon the bodies of French citizens in *La Place de l’Étoile*, Modiano juxtaposes French values that the location, la Place de l’Étoile represents, and their violation.

Tamara, like Dora, was transferred to Drancy. Like Dora, a few documents attest to her existence and disappearance. Among them is her identity card. Modiano creates another link between Dora and Tamara via documents that describe them. Modiano’s depiction of Tamara’s I.D. card focuses upon her facial features: “Elle avait le visage ovale, les cheveux châtain blond et les yeux noirs” (144). The language that he chooses echoes the description of Dora in the missing person’s notice: “visage oval, yeux gris marron….” (11).
At Tourelles, Dora may have met some women who openly protested the category of the yellow star: “Parmi les femmes que Dora a pu connaître aux Tourelles se trouvaient celles que les Allemands appellent ‘amies des juifs’: une dizaine de Françaises ‘aryennes’ qui eurent le courage, en juin, le premier jour où les juifs devaient porter l’étoile jaune, de la porter elles aussi en signe de solidarité, mais de manière fantaisiste et insolente pour les autorités d’occupation” (163-164). One of them attached a series of letters upon eight stars to spell out VICTOIRE and wore them on her belt. She placed this message upon her body in order to protest signs imposed upon others as well as to express her patriotism. Modiano notes the fate as well as the professions of these women: “Toutes furent appréhendées dans la rue et conduites au commissariat le plus proche. Puis au dépôt de la Préfecture de police. Puis aux Tourelles. Puis, le 13 août, au camp de Drancy. Ces ‘amies des juifs’ exerçaient les professions suivantes: dactylos. Papetière. Marchande de journaux. Femme de ménage. Employée des PTT. Étudiantes.” (163-164). They represent a cross section of occupations from a normal reality, but are regrouped into another category (amies des juifs) and placed on a chain that leads from the ordinary to the extreme. The streets of Paris…local police station…police headquarters…Tourelles…Drancy. At each change of location officials sign documents that move the women to the next link in the chain. Modiano indicates this part of the process through the repetitive use of the word, *puis*. In this way, the extreme passes through the day-to-day routines of unnamed individuals.

Modiano mentions those who defied the star at different points in Dora’s trajectory. He writes about Louise Jacobson just after he discusses the memo to Mlle Salomon and the possibility that Dora might have been apprehended in the street for not wearing the star. Dora and Tamara Isserlis may have crossed paths at the Tourelles prison in June 1942. (Dora arrived there on June 19th; Tamara was transferred from Tourelles to Drancy on June 22nd). Modiano
includes *les amies des juifs* in the last chapter shortly before the end of the text. *Les amies des juifs* and Dora were transferred from Tourelles to Drancy on the same day, August 13th. Finally, Dora was deported to Auschwitz on September 18th.

Modiano’s text, which began with the presence of absence, ends with the presence of absence. After all his efforts, he has found only traces of Dora’s path. Modiano’s journey in *Dora Bruder* leads to an acceptance of the dilemma of postmemory. He has tried to comprehend the past that preceded his birth, but he cannot fully know it. Dora’s story is her secret. He never meets the girl in the photograph whose look of sad defiance touched him. He never hears Dora’s voice, only its echoes.
Chapter 3

Shameful Secrets: Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Annie Ernaux’s *L’Autre fille*

If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation. Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity and worth.

Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*

According to Silvan Tomkins, the experience of shame is deeply wounding. In Edwidge Danticat’s, novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Annie Ernaux’s latest memoir, *L’Autre fille* (2011), the authors represent shame as an integral part of identity. In each text, the narrator enters into a state of shame that permeates her being as a result of traumatic events that occurred within the family. The adult first-person narrator, working through memory, endeavors to touch the buried wounds that constrict her life, using photographs to frame to her journey.

*Breath, Eyes, Memory*

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* is composed of thirty-five chapters placed within four numbered sections and an Afterword. Danticat does not give titles or headings to the sections or to the chapters. However, for the purposes of this study, I have provided thematic headings for the four main sections. Each one identifies a stage of the narrator’s journey: “Nightmare’s Child” (Part I),
Part I: Nightmare’s Child

Sophie Cacao, the narrator of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, was conceived through rape. When her mother, Martine, was sixteen-years-old, she was forcibly pulled into a cane field in Haiti and brutally violated. She never saw her attacker’s face. Martine suffers a breakdown and gives birth to the rapist’s child (Sophie). When she recovers some of her sanity, she leaves the baby in her sister Atie’s care and moves to Brooklyn, New York. Her waking hours are occupied with work (a day job and a night job caring for the elderly). With her earnings, she supports her mother, sister and daughter in Haiti. Martine’s intermittent sleep is filled with nightmares that re-enact the rape. Sophie, now twelve-years-old, has never been told about her mother’s traumatic history nor about her own origins. Sophie knows her mother only as a photograph encased in a frame placed on the bedside table in the room that she shares with her Tante Atie. There is something about this seemingly innocuous photograph that disturbs Sophie.

I only knew my mother from the picture on the night table by Tante Atie’s pillow. She waved from inside the frame with a wide grin on her face and a large flower in her hair. She witnessed everything that went on in the bougainvillia, each step, each stumble, each hug and kiss. She saw us when we got up, when we went to sleep, when we laughed, when we got upset at each other. Her expression never changed. Her grin never went away.

I sometimes saw my mother in my dreams. She would chase me through a field of wildflowers as tall as the sky. When she caught me, she would try to squeeze
me into the small frame so I could be in the picture with her. I would scream and scream until my voice gave out, then Tante Atie would come and save me from her grasp. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 8)

The first paragraph reflects the child’s warm bond with her aunt. The frequent use of the pronouns *we* and *us* establish them as a unit. Yet, there is also separateness and conflict within this family unit. The first paragraph reflects Sophie’s perception of her mother as an outsider. Martine is never part of the “we.” Instead, she is separate as reflected in the sentence syntax. Furthermore, in contrast to the evolving nature of the Sophie/Atie dyad, the mother in the photograph is frozen in time. Her facial expression, her waving gesture and the flower positioned in her hair never change.

Despite its frozen quality, the child does not perceive the photograph as being entirely static. She invests this two-dimensional object with power. It can see. The narrator creates a dynamic that inverts the subject/object relationship. The image looks at Sophie. Its eyes have the power to follow her, to see everything. It is omnipresent, intrusive—a silent witness. The disturbing quality of the photograph—as perceived by the child—suggests that she is haunted by what she cannot see and is afraid to see. This becomes more evident in the second paragraph.

Like the child in Grimbert’s novel, Sophie suffers from sleep disturbances that stem from family secrets. The nightmare, which reveals that she has acquired fragments of knowledge about the prehistory that has been withheld from her, resembles the scenario surrounding her mother’s rape. It suggests that Sophie has some awareness about her conception. Through some terrible event that occurs in a field, she will be squeezed into her mother’s body (her frame). Instead of the male rapist, who is absent, the perpetrator is Martine and the victim is Sophie. On some level, Sophie knows that her mother is irreparably damaged, psychotic and dangerous and
that, somehow, this damage has to do with a daughter’s origins. At this point in the text, the knowledge that she is not yet ready to consciously acknowledge manifests itself via repetitive, traumatic nightmares.

There are two levels of knowing represented in this passage. The first paragraph reveals the narrator’s conscious and limited knowledge about her mother—the sight of the photograph: “I only knew my mother from the picture...” The second paragraph represents her unconscious level of knowing: “I sometimes saw my mother in my dreams.” Yet these states are not entirely distinct. The narrator makes a transition between them via a gradual progression from distant and contained (waving from inside the frame) to more and more intrusive (the mother in the photo who witnesses every aspect of Sophie’s life). The narrator’s increasing unease about the photograph blends into terror as Martine enters Sophie’s dreams. The verbs become more active, threatening and grasping.

The dream reveals Sophie’s anger towards the distant mother who abandoned her baby; she is the aggressor as well as the victim. Sophie wants to enter her mother’s frame—to merge with the mother that she desires, fears and towards whom she feels murderous rage. The text that surrounds the prose passage about the photograph and the nightmare indicates that the dream is about abandonment, not only by Martine but by Atie. The prose passage about the photo and the dream is inserted within a dialogue between Sophie and Atie concerning a Mother’s Day card that Sophie has made for Atie. Atie, sadly but insistently, rejects the card: “Sophie, it is not mine. It is your mother’s. We must send it to your mother.” The card, Sophie’s creation, represents her. Giving the card to Martine, belonging to Martine, represents separation from Atie, foreshadowing a difficult departure.
That night, at a community supper, Sophie learns that Martine has sent word to Atie that she wants her daughter. She included a plane ticket for Sophie who must leave her home and her beloved Tante Atie. She pays a parting visit to her grandmother Ifè in her village and soon afterwards Atie accompanies her to the airport. Sophie has no choice. Like the packaged cassettes that travel back and forth instead of letters, she is dispatched to a foreign country and to a life with a mother she does not know.

Sophie’s journey towards consciously knowing about the prehistory that haunts her nightmares begins in a new place. When she sees Martine she realizes that her mother does not look like the woman in the photograph.

She did not look like the picture Tante Atie had on her night table. Her face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long, spindly legs. She had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her expression. Her fingers were scarred and sunburned. It was as though she had never stopped working in the fields after all. (42)

This vastly altered image reflects fatigue from too much hard work and the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder upon her body and spirit. She resembles neither the smiling young woman in the photograph nor the threatening, powerful woman who pursued Sophie in her nightmares. Rather, she is weak, tired and old.

They drive from the airport to Martine’s dismal, shabby apartment in Brooklyn. Martine takes Sophie to her room and shows her a doll that she used as a substitute for her absent daughter. Sophie notices a framed photograph on the bedside table of Martine, Atie and baby Sophie.
There was a picture of her and Tante Atie there. Tante Atie was holding a baby and my mother had her hand around Tante Atie’s shoulder.

I moved closer to get a better look at the baby in Tante Atie’s arms. I had never seen an infant picture of myself, but somehow I knew that it was me. Who else could it have been? I looked for traces in the child, a feature that was my mother’s but still mine too. It was the first time in my life that I noticed that I looked like no one in my family. Not my mother. Not my Tante Atie. I did not look like them when I was a baby and I did not look like them now. (45)

The parallel placement and pastness of the two framed photographs suggest a parallel between Sophie’s and Martine’s perceptions of one another. As Sophie knew her mother from the photo on the bedside table in Haiti, Martine knows Sophie from the photo on the bedside table in Brooklyn. Martine has a nightly ritual during which she undresses the doll, puts it in pajamas and, even though the real daughter is now there, she places the doll in the bed. The photo combined with Martine’s attachment to the doll-child substitute suggests that Martine is stuck in time.

At the beginning of the passage, the narrator has a somewhat removed stance as she describes the photograph. Sophie gradually becomes more engaged with this photograph which preserves a baby image. This picture gives her clues to her past; sight becomes linked with knowledge. In the first photograph, the gazer is the mother in the photograph while Sophie is the object being stared at, followed and pursued into her nightmares. The second photograph does not frighten her. Instead, it reveals knowledge, raises questions and is part of her journey towards knowing. This photo is not dated but the presence of baby Sophie anchors it in chronological time (about 12 years prior). The photo helps her to inscribe her body in family history, verbalize
an enigma and place it within a continuum that provides a transition between past (the baby then) and present (the twelve-year-old now).

The description of the second photo reflects the narrator’s internal thoughts placed within a dialogue between mother and daughter (45). This structure parallels the description of the first photo (inserted as a prose passage within a dialogue between Tante Atie and Sophie. Within the framed photo, it is Atie who holds the baby, not Martine. A similar disjunction takes place outside of the frame. Unlike Atie, Martine is not in tune with her daughter. While Sophie focuses upon the photograph, her mother only glances at it. Martine prefers the doll, the eternal child that she can control. There is not enough room for the flesh and blood child and the plastic doll on the bed, foreshadowing a later conflict where Martine will be incapable of relinquishing control over her daughter as a maturing young woman.

The photograph prompts Sophie to reflect upon the story she’d been told about her origins.

I couldn’t fall asleep. At home when I couldn’t sleep, Tante Atie would stay up with me. The two of us would sit by the window and Tante Atie would tell me stories about our lives, about the way things had been in the family, even before I was born. One time I asked her how it was that I was born with a mother and no father. She told me the story of a little girl who was born out of the petals of roses, water from a stream, and a chunk of the sky. That little girl, she said, was me. (47)

The passage reveals the atmosphere of secrecy that prevailed during her childhood. Atie cannot bear to talk about her sister’s rape and emotional breakdown. Instead, she substitutes a story that disguises the violence with symbolism wherein the stream represents the male rapist and the rose petals are what remain of the psychologically shattered girl. The chunk of sky
relates to a story from Haitian folklore that Sophie will hear later in the text about people who
bear great trouble; they carry a chunk of the sky on their heads.

Several hours later Sophie wakens Martine from a nightmare.

Later that night, I heard that same voice screaming as though someone was
trying to kill her. I rushed over, but my mother was alone thrashing against the
sheets. I shook her and finally woke her up. When she saw me, she quickly
covered her face with her hands and turned away.

“It is the night,” she said. “Sometimes, I see horrible visions in my sleep.”…

I climbed on the bed and tried to soothe her. She grabbed my face and
squeezed it between her palms.

“What is it? Are you scared too?” she asked. “Don’t worry.” She pulled me
down into the bed with her. “You can sleep here tonight if you want. It’s okay.
I’m here.”

She pulled the sheet over both of our bodies. Her voice began to fade as she
drifted off to sleep…. “Sophie… I will never let you go again.” (48-49)

There is something from the mother’s past that inhabits her nightmares and something about a
daughter’s face that belongs to that nightmare world. Martine did not see the rapist’s face during
the assault but like Tancred who hears the voice during the second wounding, she sees him
belatedly in the nightmare (the wound that repeats). The states of terror in the daughter’s and
mother’s dreams mirror one another. However, Sophie no longer fears her mother’s face. Instead,
Martine’s nightmare leads to a role reversal where the daughter rescues the mother by waking
her up as Atie rescued Sophie by waking her up. Although Martine’s nightmares continue
throughout the text, Sophie’s childhood nightmare is never mentioned again. An awakening
consciousness about her mother dissipates the daughter’s terrors about the unknown. In addition, the author creates movement from the extreme to the everyday that progresses from the scene about the first photograph and Sophie’s nightmare to the scenes connected with the second photograph and the mother’s nightmare. One of the ways in which the author conveys this movement is by taking the act of squeezing that is a central terrorizing element in the first nightmare and weaving it into the text surrounding the encounter with the second photograph and the second nightmare. During her first night in her mother’s apartment, Martine takes Sophie’s dress, opens the closet door and “squeeze[es] it in between some of her own” (46). Then, because of the presence of Martine’s doll, Sophie has to squeeze into the bed. After Sophie wakes Martine from her nightmare, Martine squeezes Sophie’s face, pulls her down into the bed, clings to her hand and tells Sophie that she will never let her go again. The squeezing motif resonates with Sophie’s dream (“when she caught me, she would try to squeeze me into the small frame so I could be in the picture with her”). However, now it occurs in contexts that do not frighten her.

The next day, Martine takes Sophie to meet Marc, her boyfriend and, that evening they all go to dinner at a Haitian restaurant. The restaurant episode exposes another layer of family trauma. “My mother introduced me to the waiter when he came by to take her order. He looked at us for a long time. First me, then my mother. I wanted to tell him to stop it. There was no resemblance between us. I knew it” (55). The conscious awareness she acquired through her private interaction with the second photograph reverberates in a public context. Sophie’s response to the waiter’s penetrating gaze is shame at being seen. She reacts by comforting herself with too much food and coconut milk. This self-soothing act is an early manifestation of an eating disorder that will develop into bulimia when Sophie becomes a young woman. When her
mother and Marc make remarks about the way she is eating, she feels more shame. “I tried to stuff myself and keep quiet, pretending that I couldn’t even see them. My mother now had two lives: Marc belonged in her present life, I was a living memory from the past” (56). She has been seen and excluded because she embodies a terrible secret from her mother’s past, a secret that she does not understand.

At the end of Part I, Sophie learns why she embodies a living memory. Martine begins by telling Sophie about the custom of testing and then about the rape.

“When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside...The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure”....

“My mother stopped testing me early,” she said. “Do you know why?”

I said no.

“Did Tante Atie tell you how you were born?”....

“The details are too much,” she said. “But it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you.

I did not press to find out more. Part of me did not understand. Most of me did not want to.

“I thought Atie would have told you. I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me. But now when I look at your face, I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father.”
She did not sound hurt or angry, just like someone who was stating a fact. Like naming a color or calling a name. Something that already existed and could not be changed. (60-61)

The mother’s story provides answers to the daughter’s questions about her origins. Martine’s testimony which relates the outlines of the story while screening out the horror is not a revisiting that faces the traumatic event and endeavors to put it into language. Her knowledge of both events—the testing and the rape—is split between the stilted narrative recited in the past tense and the wordless repetitive nightmares that she relives over and over in the present tense. Part I began with a photograph and a daughter’s nightmare and ends with the story of the nightmare’s location in her prehistory. However, at this point in her journey, Sophie only skirts the periphery of this knowledge. She is not yet ready to delve inside it, to listen and to understand. That will come later, after she bears her own wounds.

**Part II  A Double Wound**

Part II begins six years later when Sophie is eighteen years old. We learn what transpired during those six years through Sophie’s retrospective narrative. Martine, who is unable to face her trauma, never heals, but remains split. On the surface, she appears to be a woman who functions well. She works hard, supports her family, sends her daughter to a private bilingual school and buys a house. However, underneath she is a severely traumatized woman who relives the rape in repetitive nightmares. Sophie is affected by her mother’s split. On one hand, she benefits from the educational opportunities that Martine provides—opportunities that Martine was denied in Haiti. On the other hand, Sophie’s life is hemmed in because of Martine’s
anxieties and upbringing. There is a limited circle of acquaintance—all Haitian—and no mention of friendships with other young people. Sophie has never dated.

Martine dictates most aspects of Sophie’s life. In Part I, Martine decided that Sophie will be a doctor and that she will wait until she is eighteen years old to fall in love. In Part II, Sophie, who “had never really dared to dream on [her] own” (72) re-iterates her mother’s career choice for her because she feels that it is her responsibility to Martine, who before the rape and the psychotic break, had dreamed of becoming a doctor. The motif of the frame, introduced with Sophie’s reaction to the first framed photograph as a child, re-emerges as a feeling of constriction that dominates the young woman’s thoughts. In Part II, Martine informs Sophie that the man with whom she will fall in love must be Haitian. When Sophie falls in love with a man who does not fit her mother’s specifications (their next-door neighbor Joseph, an African-American musician) the daughter keeps the relationship a secret.

Sophie’s encounter with Joseph is the beginning of separating from her mother and from the confining family framework. Joseph questions a career choice based upon her mother’s wishes rather than upon Sophie’s dreams. He introduces her to jazz, which she comes to love. The imagery associated with Joseph is liberating. For example, during a drive home from a date he “told me to raise my head through the roof of his convertible, as we sped on the freeway, hurrying to make it home before sunrise. I felt like I was high enough to wash my hair in a cloud and have a star in my mouth” (75). The narrator conveys the tension between constriction within the family structure represented by Martine and liberation and expansiveness represented by Joseph through the use of similar phrases in different contexts. In this passage, Joseph tells Sophie to raise her head. In an earlier passage (in Part I) Martine tells Sophie, “You have the chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be. If you make
something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can raise our heads” (44). Here the emphasis is on the daughter’s obligation to counter the effects of shame and to ameliorate the damage done to the family before she was born, enmeshing her in prehistory. The repeated use of we and our as well as the use of the conditional structure—if you, then we—locks the daughter in.

Sophie’s association with Joseph brings a gradual sexual awakening. Sophie experiences her first kiss. She listens to him play music (she can hear him from her house) and feels aroused. “I heard him playing the keyboard as I lay awake in bed. The notes and scales were like raindrops, teardrops, torrents. I felt the music rise and surge, tightening every muscle in my body. Then I relaxed, letting it go, feeling a rush that I knew I wasn’t supposed to feel” (76). The passage expresses conflict between a crescendo of erotic feelings in tune with Joseph’s music and sexual repression represented by the echo of Martine’s voice. Even during this private moment, Sophie cannot entirely own her own body and passions.

Until now Sophie’s entrapment within her mother’s frame entailed a confining lifestyle and limited parameters. It becomes more severe when Martine suspects that her daughter is becoming sexually active. Martine, who was never able to articulate and work through her own trauma, will repeat the abuse she endured. She will test Sophie. The victim will become the abuser; the mother will pass on transgenerational trauma to the daughter. This violation by a trusted parent will throw Sophie into her own waking nightmare.

Danticat does not move suddenly from normal experience to trauma, from budding erotic feelings to sexual violation. Instead, she makes transitions through shifts in imagery, changes in the meanings of words and somewhat parallel situations. The night after Sophie’s magical night out with Joseph, Sophie goes out with her mother. Unlike Joseph, Martine does not ask Sophie to go out; she states an order. In contrast to the exhilarating ride in Joseph’s car, the atmosphere of
the subway is close and depressing. Sophie is not in the clouds, but is literally, underground. Martine talks about Haiti. “There are ghosts there that I can’t face, things that are still very painful for me” (78). Sophie, who has difficulty shifting the conversation from the spectres of her mother’s past to her own present, makes a tentative attempt to tell Martine about Joseph. However, because Sophie cannot yet assert her own voice, she fabricates a story about a boy (Henry Napoleon) who would meet Martine’s approval.

Sophie’s relationship with Joseph progresses; he asks her to marry him.

I didn’t say no, but I didn’t say yes. I wanted time to think. My mother would never allow it. She would go crazy.

“Let’s have dreams on it,” he said, “and if you never bring it up again, neither will I.”

That night, I slept hugging my secret. (83)

The transition into traumatic events pivots on the word secret. In this passage, the secret is something private, precious, cherished. It entails a coming together that allows room for separateness. In contrast, during a subsequent subway ride, Martine surmises that her daughter has been lying about Henry Napoleon. “She was quiet as the train raced over the bridge and back down into the tunnel. ‘There are secrets you can’t keep,’ she said. ‘Not from your mother anyway’” (84). Martine’s response stifles Sophie’s voice; she cannot continue. The word secret now assumes an ominous tone of entrapment and strangulation where there can be no privacy, no protective boundaries.60 The image of the train racing over the bridge and entering the tunnel again portends the repetition of forced penetration, of trauma that spans generations. In the next scene, Martine acts out the abuse.

60 It resonates with the image of the engulfing tentacles of the octopus that Claire Kahane uses in her analysis of a section of Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après*. See “Dark Mirrors: A Feminist Reflection on Holocaust Narrative and the Maternal Narrative.”
The next night, after seeing Joseph, I came home to find my mother sitting in the living room. She was sitting there rocking herself, holding a belt in her hand.

“I thought you were dead,” she said when I walked in.

I tried to tell her that I had not done anything wrong, but it was three in the morning. I wished that I had not asked Joseph to let me go in alone. Perhaps if he had been there. Who knows?

“Where were you?” She tapped the belt against her palm, her lifelines becoming more and more red. She took my hand with surprised gentleness, and led me upstairs to my bedroom. There, she made me lie on my bed and she tested me….

“There are secrets you cannot keep,” my mother said after the test.

She pulled a sheet up over my body and walked out of the room with her face buried in her hands. I closed my legs and tried to see Tante Atie’s face. I could understand why she had screamed while her mother had tested her. *There are secrets you cannot keep.* (84-85)

In this scene, Martine is the abuser, but she is also the victim reliving her own past trauma. The narrator conveys this through the description of Martine’s body language. Her repetitive rocking motion is self-soothing behavior; it suggests that she is reacting, not just to her daughter’s emerging sexuality, but to the testing that was done to her when she was a girl. The narrator focuses upon a small detail—Martine’s hand. Martine never strikes Sophie with the belt that she holds; she beats her own hand—the hand that will abuse her child. Although most palms have one lifeline, the narrator’s use of the plural form (lifelines) inscribes the transgenerational nature of this family’s trauma upon Martine’s palm. The custom of testing has been handed down from
mother to daughter for generations, wounding all of them. Now it is Martine’s turn to pass on a legacy of shame, paradoxically for the purpose of preserving the family’s honor. At the end of the scene Martine’s body language conveys shame; she buries her face in her hands as she leaves the room.

The narrator, who reconstructs the traumatic scene in retrospect, conveys the difficulty of representing what could not be fully experienced at the time of the event. A daughter’s sense of helpless paralysis becomes evident through a dialogue that is essentially a non-dialogue. The only one who actually speaks is Martine; Sophie’s attempts to respond are ignored or discounted. During the testing, Sophie is completely silent. The passage joins Sophie’s traumatized muteness from the past with her reflexive questioning in the present (“I wished that I had not asked Joseph to let me go in alone. Perhaps if he had been there. Who knows?”)—a voice that reveals the victim’s tendency to blame herself. In addition, the alteration of Martine’s voice in the past tense and the narrator’s self-reflexive voice in the present tense underscores the timeless quality of trauma and the difficulty of placing it in the past as an event that is over. It is never over.

Traumatic time, as Caruth has shown, can take on a quality of being outside of chronological time. Trauma can change the way time is perceived so that an event seems to be taking place outside of normal time. Danticat creates a zone where language and logic do not work: “I tried to tell her that I had not done anything wrong, but it was three in the morning.” Through focus on small details—the mother’s rocking body, the rhythmic striking of the belt upon her palm—Danticat slows down time. Martine’s body language conveys that she is not in the here and now and Sophie is isolated, trapped with her mother in a different time zone.

During the event, Sophie dissociates, by mentally travelling to other times, pleasant times. Rather than describe the actual event the narrator uses the word, tested, a term that obscures
meaning so that what is happening is not really happening. As Elaine Scarry has shown, this linguistic practice is used in torture rooms to skew meaning and often, to shift responsibility. Here, the perpetrator becomes guardian and instructor and the victim becomes the one to blame. She is guilty until proven innocent and innocence only promises continued punishment.

Sophie’s childhood nightmare is coming true. Martine has pulled her into the picture with her and Sophie, too, becomes one of the walking wounded. As Martine continues to test her every week, Sophie submits, becomes severely depressed (“…there was no longer any reason for me to live” 87), and isolates herself, avoiding Joseph. Shame becomes an integral part of her identity. In the non-logic of the universe in which Sophie is imprisoned, the only way to stop the abuse is to fail the test. Martine’s mother stopped testing her after the rape. Sophie repeats her mother’s history through self-abuse--breaking her hymen with a pestle. However, before the narrator describes the act---between Sophie getting the pestle from the kitchen and the description of what she does with it---Danticat inserts a story from Haitian folklore. It concerns a woman who bled uncontrollably from her unbroken skin. She seeks advice from the goddess Erzulie who tells her that she can stop the bleeding by changing her into another life form, but the woman would have to give up her right to be human. At the woman’s request, Erzulie transforms her into a butterfly and she never bleeds again. Freud’s *Family Romances* sheds light upon the way in which Danticat uses this folktale. According to Freud, the child finds his parents lacking. So she imagines that she belongs to a different family with better parents, usually of a higher social standing. Yet, Freud adds, the child is really trying to return the parents to the all-powerful state they occupied in her world when she was younger. Sophie regards Erzulie as the ideal mother—the strong mother who will always be there for her and who will protect her. She turns to her to protect her from the inadequate mother who hurts her.
Like the woman in the story, Sophie suffers and wants to escape. Paradoxically, Sophie’s means of escape, which mirrors Martine’s rape, will lead to another form of imprisonment. She will move with Joseph to his house in Providence, Rhode Island and marry him. This section ends on a note of hopeful desperation. “I was bound to be happy in a place called Providence….Who would not want to live there?” (89) As Martine tried to flee from her ghosts in Haiti by moving to Brooklyn, Sophie flees from her own ghosts. They will follow her. Like the woman who became free by giving up her right to be human, Sophie flies away with diminished human capacities. The sexual awakening she had experienced becomes closed off, deadened.

**Part III Reckoning with Ghosts**

Sophie must make a journey through memory to revisit her own trauma and a journey to its roots in postmemory. Unlike her shattered mother, Sophie has the life force, the strength, to face the ghosts that haunt her. Sophie’s journey back occurs belatedly. Part III begins, not with Sophie’s arrival in Providence, but with her return to Haiti about two years later with her baby daughter, Brigitte. Sophie must re-enter both the framework of her own childhood and the framework of her mother’s past. She returns to the place where she was born, her grandmother’s home--where Atie now lives with Grandma ifè. This place belongs to her personal, familial and cultural past. Generations of her family lived on the land at La Nouvelle Dame Marie. Generations are buried in the cemetery there.

Danticat structures Sophie’s revisiting through a series of encounters between Sophie and other characters. The first is between Sophie and the driver who takes her to the marketplace at La Nouvelle Dame Marie (where Atie will meet her). He comments upon her use of Creole.
“I find your Creole flawless,” he said.

“This is not my first trip to La Nouvelle Dame Marie. I was born here.”

“I still commend you, my dear. People who have been away from Haiti fewer years than you, they return and pretend they speak no Creole.”

“Perhaps they can’t.”

“Is it so easy to forget?”

“Some people need to forget.”

“Obviously, you do not need to forget,” he said.

“I need to remember.” (95)

Sophie’s flight to Providence (and into an English speaking environment) was part of her acting out a need to forget. Her return to her geographic and linguistic roots is part of the process of revisiting. Like the narrator in Annie Ernaux’s *La Honte* who immerses herself in the words and expressions used in her childhood, Sophie must enter into the language of her origins in order to begin to locate the source of her shame. The conversation with the driver establishes the linguistic framework of her journey. Later, much later, she will be able to find the words with which to express her traumatic experiences.

Sophie touches her buried wounds through a series of transgenerational encounters with family members and by revisiting sites of memory. The first site is the outdoor bathhouse at Grandma Ifè’s house where Sophie bathes the morning after her arrival.

In the bathing room was a metal basin filled with leaves and rainwater.

Even though so much time had passed since I’d given birth, I still felt extremely fat. I peeled off Joseph’s shirt and scrubbed my flesh with the leaves in

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61 For a discussion of the connection between trauma and exile that includes emotional exile from one’s own body as a result of sexual violation, geographical exile and separation from one’s past, see Rossi. Rossi argues that “Danticat’s writing resists historical amnesia…” (215).
the water. The stems left tiny marks on my skin, which reminded me of the giant goose bumps my mother’s testing used to leave on my flesh (112).

The act of bathing evokes memories of sexual abuse that are lodged in her body and experienced as goose bumps. In addition, the passage introduces the link between sexual abuse and Sophie’s possibly unrealistic perception of her body. In contrast, Atie’s friend Louise remarks that Sophie is “very mèg, bony” (100). Sophie developed bulimia, a condition connected with shame and, sometimes, with sexual abuse. Although the narrator will not name the condition until later, the passage establishes that Sophie is ashamed of her body.

In the next part of this scene, Danticat re-introduces the frame motif. Sophie returns to the house to give Brigitte a sponge bath. As she bathes her baby, she looks out the window and watches her grandmother.

There was splash in the bath house outside the window. My grandmother was naked in the bath shack, with the rickety door wide open....My grandmother had a curved spine and a pineapple-sized hump, which did not show through her clothes. Some years earlier, my mother had grown egg-sized mounds in both her breasts, then had them taken out of her. (113)

This encounter with her grandmother is wordless. Sophie sees and then makes associations to her mother’s cancer. A window to the past is opening for Sophie. The bathing scenes link three generations of women through their bodies. Their malformations, malignancies and self-perception of excessive fat are normally covered by clothing and therefore, not visible to others. Similarly, the affective poses that they present to the outside world do not reveal the emotional tumors that eat away at them. This scene lays bare their bodies. In subsequent scenes, the narrator will dig deeper to unveil the pain that lies beneath the surface. The progression from
Sophie’s goose bumps to Martine’s malignant tumors parallels the women’s emotional states. Sophie’s trauma lies just under the surface. She is almost ready to face it and to grapple with its crippling effects upon her life. Ifè has been traumatized too. She was tested when she was young. Later, her husband collapsed and died in the cane fields from heat stroke. Finally, her daughter was brutally raped. The lump has hardened for her; she has learned to live with her trauma, but not to work through it. Although Ifè’s nightmares are not as severe as Martine’s, Sophie hears her grandmother moaning in her sleep, telling someone to go away and to leave her alone. She endures and she appears to be strong. For Martine, the lump(s) are deadly. She must have them cut out. The bathing scenes establish a chain of transgenerational trauma inscribed on the bodies of the grandmother, mother and the daughter. The child, Brigitte, is still unscathed. Sophie does not want her baby to inherit nightmares; this is one of her reasons for making this journey.

The bathing scenes are silent, private and rooted within the family. The next scene involves more language and it takes place in a public place. When Sophie first arrived in the marketplace at the beginning of Part 3, she was alone. This time she goes there with her grandmother. On their way Ifè introduces her to an old man. “This here is my granddaughter, Uncle Bazie,” my grandmother said to an old man sitting on the side of the road….He took off his hat and bowed in my direction. ‘Whereabouts she from?’ asked the old man. ‘Here,’ answered my grandmother. ‘She’s from right here’” (115-16). Ifè reintroduces Sophie into the fabric of the community and reaffirms her roots. Her words resonate with Sophie’s earlier remarks to the driver--“I was born here” and “I need to remember.” It is evident that Ifè, who will play the role of the empathic listener for Sophie, senses her granddaughter’s need to reconnect and to remember.
In contrast to the first market scene, Sophie is no longer an outside observer. This time her grandmother takes her inside the scene. Sophie comments upon her grandmother’s assertiveness. “My grandmother shopped like an army general on rounds” (116). This playful simile forms a link to a sinister military presence--the *tonton macoutes*. *Tonton Macoutes* is the term for a rural militia group formed during the rule of François Duvalier (Francis, “Uncovered Stories” 235). Elizabeth Abbott notes, “Macoutes had the right of life and death over any member of society …” (Abbott 87). Through the parallel placement of the commanding grandmother and the paramilitary at this communal site (the marketplace), the narrator begins to juxtapose the extreme and the everyday as well as the individual within the context of collective history. The *macoutes* blend into the scene, laughing, drinking colas and even giving a child money for candy. Then, suddenly, the scene turns deadly.

“My foot, you see, you stepped on it!” The baby-faced *Macoute* was shouting at the coal vendor.

He rammed the back of his machine gun into the coal vendor’s ribs.

“I already know the end,” said my grandmother. She grabbed my hand and pulled me away….

I turned back for one last look. The coal vendor was curled in a fetal position on the ground. He was spitting blood. The other Macoutes joined in, pounding their boots on the coal seller’s head. Everyone watched in shocked silence, but no one said anything.

My grandmother came back for me. She grabbed hand so hard my fingers hurt.
“You want to live your nightmares too?” she hollered. (118)62

The scene foregrounds the random acts of terror to which Haitians were subjected under the Duvalier regime. It links public, collective trauma with family trauma first by naming and then by questioning. This is not an anonymous victim. He has a name; he is someone in the community who the family knows. Later, Ifè will attend his funeral. The grandmother’s rhetorical question, “You want to live your nightmares too?” is a reference to Martine’s debilitating nightmares. Martine’s rapist may have been a *macoute*. In her nightmares Martine relives the rape from the past. In this scene, Sophie becomes a witness to collective trauma that takes place in the present. In addition, she is taking another step towards revisiting her mother’s trauma and her own prehistory. She turns back physically and metaphorically in order to look, to see and ultimately to describe in detail the horror that she witnesses. At a much later point in her journey back, when she is ready to probe more deeply into prehistory, she will use the same words (with slight variations) and apply them to her conception through rape. Sophie sees and bears witness because she entered into this site with Ifè. The grandmother’s presence is critical both to a witnessing that links past and present, family and collective as well as to the necessity of leaving the scene, of not remaining paralyzed, stuck in the past and ultimately being destroyed by it.

The text shifts back to a family setting. Sophie spends the rest of the day with her grandmother who cooks a meal. After supper they talk. The grandmother, who senses Sophie’s marital difficulties, addresses the source of her granddaughter’s pain:

“Your mother? Did she ever test you?”

“You can call it that.”

62 “Everyone watched in shocked silence, but no one said anything” recalls the theme of the silence of bystanders that frequently occurs in narratives about the Holocaust such as Elie Wiesel’s *And the World Remained Silent* (*Un di velt hot geshvign*).
“That is what we have always called it.”

“I call it humiliation,” I said. “I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here.” (123)

Ifè is both the bearer of history and empathic listener. She transmits family and cultural history to Sophie and she listens to Sophie. Ifè expresses the necessity of breaking the silence, of using language to bring secrets to the light of day. She can read the unspoken signs and identify the root of the problem—testing. As a result, Sophie is able to articulate her pain, refusing to use a term that screens the event and the deep damaging shame it caused. The frame motif recurs in the next scene as Sophie listens through the open window as her grandmother tells a story to several young boys. Ifè begins, “[t]he tale is not a tale unless I tell. Let the words bring wings to our feet” (123). This statement echoes the words in the preceding dialogue, “[s]ecrets remain secret only if we keep our silence.” Sophie must be able to tell her tale in order to be liberated from her pain. The story is about a young girl and a bird (a lark). The lark convinces her to get on his back and fly away with him to a faraway land. In midair, the lark tells her that there is a king in the faraway land who will die if he does not have a little girl’s heart. The girl replies that she left her precious heart at home. The lark flies her back so that she can pick up her heart. Once she is on the ground, the girl runs to her village and never returns to the lark. Although not stated in the text, it is evident that the story is meant for Sophie. She is the little girl who left her heart in Haiti when she had to fly away on an airplane to New York City. She has come back to find her inner core. Maybe she will remain there, forever a little girl, or perhaps she will face her difficulties and return, as a stronger woman, to her life and her husband in the faraway land. However, first
Sophie has to return to the framework of her origins--home, family, culture, community and language.

In the next chapter, Sophie thinks about her life in that faraway land. She takes photographs from her wallet and looks at them.

There was one of Brigitte, all shriveled up, a few hours after she was born. I almost refused to let Joseph take pictures of me with her. I was too ashamed of the stitches on my stomach and the flabs of fat all over my body.

I looked at a small picture of Joseph’s and my “wedding.” The two of us were standing before a justice of the peace, a month after we had eloped. I had spent two days in the hospital in Providence and four weeks with stitches between my legs. Joseph could never understand why I had done something so horrible to myself. I could not explain to him that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom.

Even though it occurred weeks later, our wedding night was painful. It was like the tearing all over again; the ache and soreness had still not disappeared….That first very painful time gave us the child. (129-30)

The photographs reveal and conceal. The narrator uses them to access memories of the pain that lies behind the visible two-dimensional image. A photo of a newborn baby evokes thoughts about the mother’s shame about her own body. A wedding photo calls forth memories of self-abuse that has enduring consequences. Martine was neither willing to listen to Sophie nor to allow her to separate. Paradoxically, in order to deliver a message that Martine could understand, Sophie who was unable to assert her own voice, had to mirror her mother’s wound.
The scene shifts. Sophie sits on the porch with Brigitte and watches a young boy, Eliab, fly his kite.

He shuffled around a lot, trying to maintain his balance and keep the kite in the air. He slowly released the thread, allowing his kite to venture closer to the clouds.

Another kite swooped down like a vulture. There were pieces of glass and broken razors on the other kite’s tail. One of the razors slashed his thread and sent Eliab’s kite drifting aimlessly into the breeze. The kite drifted further and further out of sight. Finally it dived down and disappeared, crashing like a lost parachute at an unknown distance.

Eliab reined in his thread. He pulled it with all his might, tying it around the stick as it came to him. The thread suddenly seemed endless. He got tired of coiling, dropped the stick, broke down and cried. (130)

As Caruth has demonstrated, witnessing the pain of others can be part of the process of revisiting one’s own trauma. This passage echoes Sophie’s history through the imagery which recalls the special night with Joseph when she felt as though she, too, was venturing towards the sky. She could wash her hair in the clouds. Then came the testing that cut her down. Her despair resonates with Eliab’s tears. The shift in focus forms a link between Sophie’s trauma and Eliab’s. Like the boy in *Un Secret*, Sophie gradually becomes an empathic listener capable of listening to another’s wounds partly because she has sustained a wound of her own. Sophie listens to another’s pain again when Atie expresses her despair. The testing to which Ifè subjected her daughter led to a deadened life for Atie; she suffers from debilitating depression. This interchange between Sophie and Atie occurs while Atie is feeding a baby pig. Atie’s concrete action recalls a simile from an earlier chapter where Martine told Sophie about how Atie reacted
when she was tested. “Your Tante Atie hated it. She used to scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse” (60). When the pig continues to disturb their sleep, Atie’s screams from adolescence reverberate across time and generations through related imagery. “The pig oinked all night… ‘I will kill it,’ said my grandmother. ‘I will kill it.’ My daughter woke up with a sharp cry. I fed her and rocked her back to sleep. The pig it [sic] was still crying, but there was nothing I could do” (137). Brigitte’s cry faintly echoes the family legacy. Sophie can do nothing to help her beloved and broken Tante Atie. She can only try, through her journey, to lessen the impact of transgenerational trauma upon her child.

The next day, the family learns that Dessalines (the coal vendor who was beaten by the macoutes in the marketplace) has died from his wounds. The news of Dessalines’ death triggers a revisiting of traumatic prehistory. Danticat crafts an associative chain that elucidates this revisiting process. Louise, someone outside the family, is the messenger who walks from the marketplace to the family’s home. The frame motif recurs at the beginning of this scene as Sophie watches from the threshold of the house.

“They killed Dessalines.”

“Who killed Dessalines?” asked my grandmother.

“The Macoutes killed Dessalines.”…

“Next might be me or you with the Macoutes,” said Louise.

“We already had our turn,” said my grandmother. “Sophie, you keep that child behind the threshold. You are not to bring her out until that restless spirit is in the ground.” (138)

The grandmother’s response to Louise’s frightened statement ties the family’s traumatic past with ongoing collective trauma. Sophie is not a participant, but she is a witness. The external
dialogue to which Sophie is witness sets off thoughts expressed as an internal monologue. She begins by relating the *tonton macoutes*’ role as a bogeyman in fairytales. Then she relates how human *tonton macoutes* routinely rape women. “When they [macoutes] entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter’s turn” (139). By weaving phrases that resemble phrases from the preceding dialogue (“we already had our turn”) into the internal narrative, Danticat conveys aspects of the associative process that moves the narrator from her position as witness to another’s trauma to accessing the prehistory that haunts her. The narrator continues.

My father might have been a Macoute. He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down to the ground. He had a black bandanna over his face so she never saw anything but his hair, which was the color of eggplants. He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up.

For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in her sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside her. At night, she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares.” (139)

The crucial link between ongoing collective trauma (in the past and in the present) and personal trauma from Sophie’s prehistory occurs through the phrase, *my father*. This is the first time that Sophie verbally acknowledges her rapist father and owns him. The verb, *pounding*, recalls the
use of the same word in the passage about Dessalines (118). In both scenes, there is stunned silence. The fetal position Dessalines assumed while the _macoutes_ were beating him relates to the fetus formed inside Martine from the pounding to which she was subjected. These similar images link conception and death, disaster and birth—all tied to the words, finally uttered, _my father_. The narrator continues to describe Martine’s breakdown, suicide attempts, her inability to care for her child and Atie’s role as caretaker. This internal monologue represents another stage in the process of placing prehistory into an integrated chronological narrative. It forms a contrast to Sophie’s earlier fragmented knowledge about her mother’s past. This section of text conveys wholeness and cohesiveness—“Somehow Dessalines’s death brought to mind _all_ of those frightening memories” (140 emphasis added). In addition, the phrase, _brought to mind_, indicates that, through her role as secondary witness to Dessalines’ death, her mother’s history (previously echoed in repetitive childhood nightmares about a photograph) is registering on a conscious level.

In a subsequent scene, Sophie cooks a meal. During the first cooking episode, Sophie was the observer and Ifè was the active subject. Now it is Sophie who cooks while her grandmother observes. As Hirsch and Spitzer have demonstrated, contact with testimonial objects can activate body memories. This act of cooking in the traditional manner with implements from the past at the site of her grandmother’s house generates body memories. “I was surprised how fast it came back. The memory of how everything came together to make a great meal. The fragrance of the spices guided my fingers the way no instructions or measurements could…I rushed back and forth between the iron pots in the yard. The air smelled like spices that I had not cooked with since I left my mother’s home two years before. I usually ate random concoctions: frozen dinners, samples from global cookbooks, food that was easy to put together and brought me no pain. No memories of a past that at times was cherished and at others despised” (151). The random
concoctions and frozen foods ingested are similar to the fragmented and frozen nature of Sophie’s shattered psyche. She can only simulate sexual intimacy by dissociating and she can only take in food that obliterates memory. As Valérie Loichot observes, “Sophie painfully overcomes the yoke of food by engaging with it through cooking” (Loichot 106). Using her body to pull together the components of a meal that will truly nourish her is another step towards synthesis and wholeness.63

The cooking episode leads to deeper levels of witnessing. After the meal, Sophie and her grandmother sit together. Ifê hears something that Sophie cannot hear.

“There is no way to know anything unless you apply your ears. When you listen, it’s kôm si you had deafness before and you can hear now….Now listen....

“The young child in the bushes, it is Ti Alice. Someone is there with her.”…

“She was with a friend, a boy.”…

“I think I hear a little,” I said, rocking my daughter with excitement.”…

“My grandmother wrapped her arms around her body, rocking and cradling herself.

“What is happening now?” I asked.

“Her mother is waiting for her at the door of their hut. She is pulling her inside to test her.”

The word sent a chill through my body.

“She is going to test to see if young Alice is still a virgin,” my grandmother said. “The mother, she will drag her inside the hut, take her last small finger and

63 Valerie Loichot interprets this cooking episode as Sophie’s first step towards healing. It reconnects her with the land and links the four generations of women in her family. “Food defines this community of women and links the generations in a collective, physical ceremony of tradition and memory…” (106). In her study of the use of food and cooking in Danticat’s work, Loichot makes connections between writing and cooking and argues that “food is a form of language necessary to remember the past and to heal the self” (92).
put it inside her to see if it goes in. You said the other night that your mother tested you. That is what is now happening to Ti Alice.” (153-54)

The grandmother, who demonstrates an ability to hear on more than one level, is teaching her granddaughter how to witness another’s pain. Both of them respond through their bodies. First Grandma Ifè rocks herself—as Martine rocked herself before testing Sophie. Then Sophie feels a chill—like the goose bumps she felt while bathing. Rather than just use the word, testing, the grandmother verbalizes exactly what will happen to Ti Alice. This listening, facilitated by the grandmother, enables Sophie to progress to the point where she can remember and articulate what happened to her. “I closed my eyes upon images of my mother slipping her hand under the sheets and poking her finger at a void, hoping that it would go no further than the length of her fingernail” (155). During the actual time of the event, she was not entirely present because she entered into a split-off state. (“I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known” 155). Now, belatedly, she closes her eyes, not to block out what is happening, but to see what she could not bear to face. Then she is able to reflect upon how she transferred this behavior to her relationship with her husband. “After my marriage, whenever Joseph and I were together, I doubled.” Finally, she is able to discuss the practice of testing with her grandmother and to express her shame and pain. The progression through empathic listening towards conscious understanding paves the way for Sophie to begin to relinquish some of her anger towards her mother. When Martine arrives, Sophie accepts Martine’s overtures of reconciliation. She is almost ready to move from understanding to active engagement.
Part IV: Breaking the Chain

Martine, Sophie and Brigitte fly back to New York together. That night, at Martine’s home in Brooklyn, Martine tells Sophie that she is pregnant with Marc’s child; she wants to get an abortion.

“The nightmares. I thought they would fade with age, but no, it’s like getting raped every night. I can’t keep this baby.”

“It must have been much harder then but you kept me.”

“When I was pregnant with you, Mamman made me drink all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn’t go away.” (190)

The excerpt of their dialogue reveals that Martine, who is incapable of revisiting and working through the original embodied trauma, is reliving it. Sophie receives another blow: she learns that her mother, along with her beloved Grandma Ifè, tried to abort her and Sophie lived at the expense of her mother’s sanity. Sophie’s response to her mother’s dilemma reveals mixed emotions. She listens and gives some sensible advice such as telling her mother to seek help. However, remarks that censor the speaker such as “you can’t say that” and later, “don’t say that” (192) indicate that she cannot function as an empathic listener in this situation. While she advocates for this baby’s survival in the present, she is also entering into prehistory and fighting for unwanted baby Sophie. Perhaps, too, she is expressing underlying rage at her mother by encouraging her to go through with a pregnancy that will probably cause another psychotic break and another suicide attempt. She wants to kill her mother at the same time that she wants to protect her. Sophie’s conflicting feelings become more evident when she is about to leave.

“You forgive me, don’t you?” she [Martine] asked.
I leaned over and kissed her stomach.

“It will be a beautiful baby,” I said.

“Don’t call it a baby.” (192)

Sophie’s evasion of her mother’s question suggests that she does not forgive her. Her body language—kissing the barrier (her mother’s stomach) that separates her from the fetus means that she is really kissing baby Sophie, who her mother tried to destroy. For Sophie, this revisiting of her own prehistory allows her to nurture and protect herself—the fetus that is/was growing inside her mother’s frame. She is trying to change the story.

As she drives home to Providence she visualizes her mother’s face. This leads first to thoughts about nightmares—first about Martine’s nightmares (“I kept seeing her face…I knew the intensity of her nightmares. I had seen her curled up….as she hollered for the images of the past to leave her alone…” (192-93) and then about her own nightmares (“After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts…Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn’t both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl” 193). Sophie has indeed inherited what Eva Hoffman calls the shadows of experience.64

The adult narrator’s dream recalls her childhood nightmare—prompted by the framed photograph of Martine—in which her mother tries to squeeze Sophie into the picture. In Martine’s repetitive nightmares, the lack of a face is part of the frozen reenactment of the rape during which her attacker’s face was covered. In the daughter’s dream, the facelessness represents the absence of the story. This current nightmare, which pulls the daughter into the

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64 “This is exactly the crux of the second generation’s difficulty: that it has inherited not experience, but its shadows” (Hoffman 66).
Lipman 159

mother’s universe, indicates that Sophie feels overwhelmed by a history that she does not understand. 65

When Sophie arrives in Providence, she looks at a framed photograph of herself just after Brigitte was born. The sight of the photograph evokes thoughts about what is not seen in the photograph—her obsession with being fat and the tearing from her self-abuse with the pestle. 66

“All I kept thinking was, Thank God it was a Caesarean section. The tearing from a natural birth would have totally destroyed me” (196). This phrasing echoes Martine’s words about giving birth again—she’d be destroyed psychologically. (“They will take it out of me one day and put me away the next” 192).

That night, Sophie dissociates while having sex with Joseph.

He reached over and pulled my body towards his. I closed my eyes and thought of the Marassa, the doubling. I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off my body, but really I was somewhere else. Finally, as an adult, I had a chance to console my mother. I was holding her and fighting off that man, keeping those images out of her head. I was telling her that it was all right. That it was not a demon in her stomach, that it was a child, like I was once a child in her body. I was telling her that I would never let anyone put her away in a mental hospital, that I would take care of her. I would visit her every night in my doubling and from my place as a shadow on the wall, I would look after her and

65 The nightmare, a metaphor for the unconscious transmission of unarticulated transgenerational personal and collective trauma in Breath, Eyes, Memory is a key element in Rivka Bekerman-Greenberg’s play, “Eavesdropping On Dreams.” It explores the impact of a Holocaust survivor’s untold stories upon her daughter and granddaughter as well as the effects of finally breaking the silence.

66 A pestle is often used with a pounding motion. It recalls the pounding in Sophie’s dream as well as the macoutes pounding upon Dessalines thereby linking personal and collective trauma.
wake her up as soon as the nightmares started, just like I did when I was home.

(200)

The passage begins with Sophie being acted upon as a passive object. When she enters into a
dissociative state, the split-off part of her becomes an active subject who uses agency. The
repetitive use of the conditional tense as well as the present participle sets up another reality that
is outside of normal time. It moves between past and present and transforms both to create
another path, another possibility. Behind these words is the unexpressed wish that could only be
fulfilled through the conditional structure (if….then). If she can take care of her mother, protect
her, fix her, then her mother would become the mother she never had—a sane, whole person who
did not try to abort baby Sophie, but instead, wanted her baby, cherished her, cared for her and
who did not abandon her. The “I” in the split-off states seems to be strong since it fights; yet the
“I” is also ephemeral—a shadow on the wall, having no substance of its own; it exists only as
offspring of her mother’s recurrent nightmares. After Joseph falls asleep, Sophie stuffs herself
with food and then forces herself to vomit. During the bulimic episode triggered by the
dissociative state, the shadow fills the void with food. Biting is aggressive and eating
anaesthetizes pain. Furthermore, during the split-off state, the narrator places the fetus in
Martine’s stomach rather than in her uterus. The binge and purge behavior resembles pregnancy
and abortion. Her actions echo Martine’s behavior during her first pregnancy—Ifè had her
swallow various substances in order to induce a miscarriage. Sophie is reliving her prehistory
through her body.

Martine hears voices from inside her; the demon-fetus taunts her with the rapist’s voice,
calling her a whore, a *putain*. Martine, who can bear it no longer, commits suicide by stabbing
herself seventeen times in the stomach. Marc and Sophie bring the body back to Haiti for burial:
“My mother was the heavy luggage that went under the plane.” The phrasing reflects the transgenerational baggage that weighs upon the narrator. The shadow on the wall could not save her mother. Nevertheless, Sophie endeavors to accomplish symbolically what she could not achieve in reality.

Freud’s essay on “Family Romances,” which elucidated the narrator’s use of the folktale about the mighty goddess Erzulie in the previous section, also sheds light upon Sophie’s behavior after her mother’s death. According to Freud, behind the child’s fantasy of an ideal parent is a desire, not to reject her own parent, but to invest her with the qualities of the idealized parent and thus return to a time in childhood when the parent was perceived as being omnipotent. Previously, Sophie turned to Erzulie, her ideal mother, in order to escape from Martine, the mother who abused her. Sophie selects a red suit, gloves and shoes from her mother’s closet for Martine’s burial attire. Martine admired Erzulie too. Indeed she decorated her entire house in Erzulie’s color--red. Martine can claim her house in a way that she cannot own her body or assert her voice. The red outfit, which mirrors the aesthetic framework of Martine’s domestic interior, speaks for her in death. When Marc says, “Saint Peter won’t allow your mother into Heaven with that,” Sophie’s reply is, “She is going to Guinea…or she is going to be a star. She’s going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She’s going to be free” (228). As a child, Sophie knew her mother as the image in a photograph that had the power to invade her dreams and turn them into nightmares. As an adolescent, she encountered a fragile mother. Now the adult daughter transforms the pieces of the fractured mother into a cohesive whole, clothed in strength—a mother who is powerful enough to care for the baby she abandoned.

After the funeral in Haiti, Sophie revisits past trauma in yet another context when she runs from the cemetery into the cane field. “I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off’
my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground” (233). During her first visit to Haiti, Sophie jogged past the cane fields. By so doing, she approached the periphery of past trauma, but distanced herself from it as well. Now, she voluntarily breaks into the field of nightmares. She confronts the ghosts of the past on a deeper, more active level. As in Sophie’s split-off fantasy state, the “I” is an active subject. However, this subject operates on a conscious, integrated level. There are many verbs that denote fighting in this passage. Some of these verbs appeared before (when the Macoutes pounded Dessalines and in Sophie’s nightmares), but this time the victim is the aggressor. Significantly, this event is not ongoing; the repeated use of the past tense firmly places it in the past. Sophie moves from one funeral to another. She buries her mother and puts her to rest. Then she symbolically attacks and kills her faceless rapist-father and uproots the terrifying shadows buried deep inside her. Working through trauma entails putting it into language. Sophie has journeyed from the photograph that engulfed her to a site where conception and destruction intersect. By changing the story, she breaks the chain of abuse. No longer Nightmare’s child, she is ready for the work of mourning.

*L’Autre fille*

*L’Autre fille* is structured as a letter to Ernaux’s deceased sister, Ginette who died in 1938. Ernaux was born in 1940. As in Grimbert’s *Un Secret*, the story of the dead sibling is a family secret that weighs upon the life of the replacement child. The letter is a testimonial object that works in reverse through which the narrator endeavors to create a bridge across time and space.
L'Aute fille is divided into three parts. Each one commences with the narrator’s engagement with family photographs. Part I begins,

C’est une photo de couleur sépia, ovale, collée sur le carton jauni d’un livret, elle montre un bébé juché de trois quarts sur des cousins festonnés, superposés. Il est revêtu d’une chemise brodée, à une seule bride, large, sur laquelle s’attache un gros noeud un peu en arrière de l’épaule, comme une grosse fleur ou les ailes d’un papillon géant. Un bébé tout en longueur, peu charnu, dont les jambes écartées avancent, tendues jusqu’au rebord de la table. Sous ses cheveux bruns ramenés en rouleau sur son front bombé, il écarquille les yeux avec une intensité presque dévorante. Ses bras ouverts à la manière d’un poussin semblent s’agiter. On dirait qu’il va bondir. Au-dessous de la photo, la signature du photographe –M. Ridel, Lillebonne – dont les initiales entrelacées ornent aussi le coin supérieur gauche de la couverture, très salie, aux feuillets à moitié détachés l’un de l’autre.

Quand j’étais petite, je croyais – on avait dû me le dire – que c’était moi. Ce n’est pas moi, c’est toi.

Il y avait pourtant une autre photo de moi, prise chez le même photographe, sur la même table, les cheveux bruns pareillement en rouleau, mais j’apparaissais dodue avec de yeux enfoncés dans une bouille ronde, une main entre les cuisses. Je ne me souviens pas avoir été intriguée alors par la différence, patente, entre les deux photos. (9-10)

This opening passage sets up a comparison between the two baby girls. The extensive description of the first photograph dominates. The shorter portrayal of the second photograph as well as its position in the text – second place – conveys that the sister, the first born, is more
important than the baby who replaces her. The two photographs, set side by side, introduce the theme of doubling which Ernaux uses to express the dilemma of the replacement child. The second baby has an unspoken obligation to be the double of the first. Later in the text, the narrator will articulate what she felt as a little girl--she always thought she was the double of someone who lived elsewhere.

The juxtaposition of the two photographs sets up conflicting realities – much like the conflicting realities in Grimbert’s early childhood world where objects around the house suggest alternative and unvoiced versions of family history. In both Breath, Eyes, Memory and L’Autre fille, the adult narrator uses photographs to introduce family secrets. As a child, Sophie saw the picture of Martine on Tante Atie’s night table, but she was not yet able to consciously acknowledge that she did not look like her mother. The unspoken subtext—that Sophie may resemble her father—is part of the family secret. Scraps of knowledge about her conception through rape--overwhelm her in the form of nightmares that she does not understand. In L’Autre fille, the child is told that both photographs are of her as a baby. Yet they are obviously different, creating confusion around her body and identity. Who is she? When her parents look at her, who do they see? As a little girl, she coped with this dilemma by not paying attention to the differences between the two photographs. The narrator underscores the simultaneity of conflicting realities with a transitional sentence-- “[i]l y avait pourtant une autre photo de moi”--that can be read two ways: There was another photograph; it was a photo of me or there was another photograph (also) of me. The ambiguity of this sentence allows the adult narrator to create a bridge across time and space that provides access to the child’s state of being in between knowing and not knowing. There is another framed photo on the mantelpiece of Ginette, the deceased sister, as an older child. Ernaux, who implies that her parents did not provide any
explanation about who the girl in this photograph was, does not mention this photograph until later in the text. However, I note it in this part of my discussion because it was part of the atmosphere of that surrounded Ernaux’s early childhood. Here the conflicting reality is visibility (the child in the photo) vs. invisibility (no one talks about her; Annie is not supposed to know that her sister existed). She is invisible in plain sight.

The next object is the sister’s tombstone in the cemetery; her parents’ tombstones are beside it. This placement sets up the parents and the dead child as a unit from which Ernaux is excluded. These two objects, the baby’s photograph and the child’s tombstone establish a lifespan—a chronology from which the narrator was also excluded. There appears to be no date of birth on the tombstone, but the date of death is engraved (jeudi saint 1938). This interval of time, the invisible sister’s lifespan, is an absence, a void that haunts the narrator.

Her parents never spoke about the sister’s tombstone. Ernaux now names the formerly unacknowledged markers that contain her sister’s lifespan and uses them to frame her journey. The inscription on the tombstone, “décédée le Jeudi-Saint 1938,” is significant for Ernaux—“comme la preuve inscrite dans la pierre du choix de Dieu et de ta sainteté” (11). These are literally words written in stone: her sister was the good child, the sainted child. “Depuis vingt-cinq ans que je viens sur les tombes, à toi je n’ai jamais rien à dire” (11-12). She has never used her own words to grapple with that which has been written in stone—and perhaps engage it, move it, rewrite it. Now, before her sister’s tombstone, the adult narrator begins an address to the irreplaceable daughter for whom she was the substitute.

In the letter, Ernaux describes officially stamped documents that she found buried in a strong-box (un coffre fort) in the attic. These documents link them. “D’après l’état civil tu es ma soeur” (12). Then, she introduces another, conflicting reality.

Tu as toujours été morte. Tu es entrée morte dans ma vie l’été de mes dix ans.

Née et morte dans un récit, comme Bonny, la petite fille de Scarlett et de Rhett dans *Autant en emporte le vent.* (12-13)

Between these two statements, these two conflicting realities, is a rupture. Ernaux defines the paradox by articulating the conditions that prevent them from being sisters in a tangible way. Many of these lacking conditions have to do with the body and with the contact of bodies—with sight, voice and touch. Through this journey, Ernaux constructs her own document. The cover of *L’Autre fille* is shaped to resemble a letter and it bears the postmark, *les affranchis.* Unlike the buried, secret documents, her letter breaks the silence and goes out into the world. Through the document she creates Ernaux constructs ways in which she can metaphorically touch her sister’s mind and body. She will take some of the characteristics that are lacking and make them happen through the text. One of the ways in which she accomplishes this is through references to characters in fictional texts. The first intertextual reference is to Bonny in *Gone with the Wind.* The similarities to Ernaux’s sister are obvious. First, her name, Bonny (good, pretty) reflects the hierarchy that was introduced by the comparison between the two photographs. Bonny’s parents adored her; when she died suddenly at a young age, her parents were bereft. In particular, Rhett,
like Ernaux’s father, was devastated by his daughter’s death. His irrationality (he refused to release the body for burial because his child was afraid of the dark) resonates with Ernaux’s mother’s remark about her husband’s reaction to Ginette’s death (“mon mari était fou”). The abrupt way in which Bonny died—a riding accident—corresponds to Freud’s concept of trauma as an accident where life and death are in close proximity. The survivor cannot fully experience the impact at the time of the event. Instead it is experienced belatedly. The phrase, “tu es entrée morte dans ma vie,” captures the impact of this knowledge upon ten-year-old Annie who could not consciously process it. Although Ernaux was not present at the time of her sister’s death, she is the survivor. As the replacement child, already merged with her sister through the photograph, she reckons with the trauma of death and survival belatedly—many decades after the event. Furthermore the reference to Gone with the Wind raises the question of history, a problem with which she will grapple during the course of this text.

The trauma for Ernaux was not so much the sister’s death, as the story of her death and the context within which she heard it. Before she recounts the scene, Ernaux relates that she was playing with another child. Then she says, “je ne sais pas comment j’ai été alertée, peut-être la voix de ma mère plus basse d’un seul coup. Je me suis mise à l’écouter, comme si je ne respirais plus” (15). The preceding sentences move from an active child playing (je joue) to a child who could not breathe. Ernaux extends the feeling of holding one’s breath by visually representing the suspended breath with a large space between “je ne respirais plus” and the story that follows.

Je ne peux pas restituer son récit, seulement sa teneur et les phrases qui ont traversée toutes les années jusqu’à aujourd’hui, se sont propagées en un instant sur toute ma vie d’enfant comme une flamme muette et sans chaleur, tandis que je
continuais de danser et de tournoyer à côté d’elle, tête baissée pour n’éveiller aucun soupçon.

[Ici, il me semble que les paroles déchirent une zone crépusculaire, me happe et c’en est fini.]

Elle raconte qu’ils ont eu une autre fille que moi et qu’elle est morte de la diphtérie à six ans, avant la guerre, à Lillebonne. Elle décrit les peaux dans la gorge, l’étouffement. Elle dit: elle est morte comme une petite sainte
elle rapporte les paroles que tu lui as dites avant de mourir: je vais aller voir la Sainte Vierge et le bon Jésus
elle dit mon mari était fou quand il t’a trouvée morte en rentrant de son travail aux raffineries de Port-Jérôme
elle dit c’est pas pareil de perdre son compagnon
elle dit de moi elle ne sait rien, on n’a pas voulu l’attrister
A la fin, elle dit de toi elle était plus gentille que celle-là
Celle-là, c’est moi. (15-16)

The way in which Ernaux relates the scene captures elements of trauma. She uses the present tense throughout. It is still happening now; it is not over. The lack of periods or of any marks to indicate pauses conveys that it is one long moment. The child holds her breath as she listens to the story; the adult holds her breath as she writes it. In contrast to Danticat’s highly descriptive style, the spare unembellished quality of écriture plate which Ernaux employs when she relates her mother’s words, accesses the linguistic milieu of her childhood.67 The use of italics emphasizes the imprint of the mother’s words. The narrator uses a vocabulary of blows

67 For a discussion of l’écriture plate, see Motte. Ernaux describes l’écriture plate, as natural; it contains the essentials—the kind of writing she used when writing to her parents. Motte comments, “[i]t is a language that belongs, in a sense, to them [her parents]…” (55)
and wounding such as the verbs *happer* and *déchirer*. The worst blow is, “elle était plus gentille que celle-là.” While the pronoun *elle* means the mother’s deceased daughter, *celle* (a word that can be applied to an object) refers to her living daughter, turning the child into an object-- that one. Moreover, it puts her at a distance—*celle-là*—that one over there. Even though Annie is physically close to her mother (she’s playing next to her), in her mother’s affections, the first daughter is always closest and always the best.

Ernaux says that she lowered her head in order to evade suspicion—so that her mother would not realize that she was listening to the story that she was not supposed to hear. However, the lowered head, the lowered gaze, is also the physical manifestation of the affect shame. This story, this trauma, is the genesis of shame for the child. The vocabulary of wounding, particularly the phrase, “il me semble que les paroles déchirent une zone crépusculaire” conveys the concept of shame as a wound made from the inside. Shame forges identity. She is split, too. Her body dances and turns near and around her mother. Yet, at the same time she feels pushed aside by the mother who she needs. Her world revolves around her like the earth revolves around the sun, like the earth needs the sun for warmth and light and life. Now her sun, her source, is like *une flamme muette et sans chaleur*. Something has changed forever.

Ernaux conveys the static quality of this traumatic event by comparing it to a photograph. “Pas plus qu’une photo, la scène du récit n’a bougé. Je vois la place exacte des deux femmes dans la rue…” (17-18). In addition to seeing it as a fixed image, she feels in her body. “Plus que tout, la réalité de la scène m’est attestée par une sorte d’hallucination corporelle, je me sens courir en cercles rapprochés autour des deux femmes, je vois les silex de la rue….” This is an unprocessed field memory that remains fixed and, sixty years later, she remains fixed inside it. The years pass, but they don’t change the words. ”Je m’en éloigne d’année en année, mais c’est
une illusion. Il n’y a pas de temps entre toi et moi. Il y a des mots qui n’ont jamais changé” (19). Like the two photographs, the passage establishes an opposition between the two girls through words that define identity. Annie is everything that is not *gentille*. She is, rather, *intrépide*, *coquette-sale, goulue, mademoiselle je sais tout, déploissante, tu as le diable au corps* (20).

Her relationship to her dead sister is defined by these words. “Soixante ans après je n’en finis pas de buter sur ce mot, d’essayer d’en démêler les significations par rapport à toi, invisible, adorée. Je suis écartée, poussée pour te faire de la place. Repoussée dans l’ombre tandis que tu planes tout en haut dans la lumière éternelle. Comparée, moi l’incomparable, l’enfant unique. La réalité est affaire de mots, système d’exclusions. Plus/Moins. Ou/ Et. Avant/Après. Etre ou ne pas être. La vie ou la mort” (21). The theme of oppositions, first established by the two photographs, vaguely perceived, but as yet unacknowledged by the young child, becomes through the shock of the story, a way of perceiving reality. The powerful effects of postmemory are evident here. This reality must exclude one of the daughters; ironically, it is the living child who is in the shadows, not the ghost.

Part 1 ends with a system of oppositions and exclusions and with conflicting, yet parallel realities that exist outside of chronological time. “Seul est resté dans ma mémoire ce récit-là....Le récit unique—il n’y en aura jamais d’autre—qui inauguré pour moi le monde où tu existes en morte et en sainte. Le récit qui profère la vérité et m’exclut” (25-26). The story is received as a blow. In Part 2 the narrator will endeavor to write another story that includes her and in which she faces and begins to ameliorate the blow.

Part 2 begins with the sentence, “il y a une autre histoire ” (28). The narrator begins this story—her story—by reflecting upon photographs of herself. Like the photographs at the beginning of Part I, these images conceal as well as reveal. They present a sturdy child when, in
fact, her health was precarious. “Mes photos de bébé rebondi et de fillette robuste sont trompeuses. A dix ans, au moment du récit de ta mort, j’ai un lourd passé d’enfant délicat, victime d’affections insolites, d’accidents, qu’on détaillle devant moi…” (28). The narrator enumerates them including a rare case of fever contracted from cow’s milk, lameness that entailed placing her legs in casts for half a year and a fall on a sharp object that tore a large hole in her lip and left significant scarring. The circumstances surrounding the most severe health problem, a case of tetanus that almost killed her, bears resemblance to her sister’s final illness. The ages at which they occurred were similar; Annie was five; the sister was six. Neither child had been vaccinated against these diseases. Little Annie knew the story of her miraculous survival; her mother told it many times. The narrator’s reflection upon this story commences with a clear chronological narrative.

Sans doute à cause de la réitération de ce récit, [the story her mother told about Annie’s tetanus] j’ai fixé tôt les images de ce moment que je ne me souviens pas avoir vécu avec beaucoup d’effroi, bien moins en tout cas que les bombardements. Je revois le jardin public ensoleillé, je cours vers mes parents parce que je me suis fait mal en m’amusant à grimper sur un banc aux lattes arrachées, ils sont couchés dans l’herbe, je leur montre un petit trou rougi audessous du genou gauche, ils dissent c’est rien, va jouer

je suis sur une chaise longue dans la cuisine, je ne joue pas, ma cousine C. est là en vacances chez nous, après manger …

je vois les images confuses d’un remue-ménage, d’allées et venues autour de ma chaise longue

je suis dans mon petit lit près du leur, elle est penchée au-dessus de moi
plus tard, sans doute un autre jour, un flot de sang m’emplit la bouche, il y a du monde dans la chambre ….

je revois Bernadette, la poupée raide qu’on ne pouvait pas asseoir, en robe bleue

L’ordre des deux récits, le mien et le tien, est à rebours du temps. C’est un ordre dans lequel j’ai failli mourir avant que tu sois morte. J’en suis certaine: ce dimanche d’été 1950, quand j’entends le récit de ta mort, je n’imagine pas, je me souviens. Je vois, avec une précision sans doute bien plus grande que maintenant, la chambre de Lillebonne, leur lit à eux parallèle à la fenêtre, le mien en bois de rose toute à côté. JE TE VOIS COUCHEE A MA PLACE ET C’EST MOI QUI MEURS. (30-32)

At first, the child’s own memory of the injury that caused the tetanus is clear about time and place. The narrator places her body and her personal story firmly within the broader historical context: it was 1945; she was playing in the public garden and she was afraid of the bombings.68 The next section of this passage is less clear. It is not a contiguous narrative; rather it consists of fragments of memories of events that occurred at different times. Moreover, it is structurally parallel to the child narrator’s memory of the story she overheard at age ten about the sister who died. Like the passage that relates her memory of the story she overheard and her reaction to it, there are no periods from “je revois le jardin…to “l’ordre des deux récits…est à rebours du temps.” This passage echoes the repeated pattern of recollection from the first passage (elle dit),

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68 Bombings or fear of the bombings by Allied forces during World War II are part of the context within which Ernaux and Kofman relate memories about cuts to their bodies. Ernaux was afraid of the bombings when she sustained a puncture wound that caused tetanus. Kofman spent the night in an underground shelter just after her tonsillectomy. These similar associations between their bodies and this aspect of World War II—the bombings that promised to liberate them could also kill them—provides a point of intersection between their stories.
but this time it is *je suis, je vois*. The upheaval (*le remue-ménage*) echoes the internal chaos engendered by the first story and resonates with the child’s repetitive circling.

The two passages, which bear broad visual similarities to one another, continue the doubling motif established by the photographs of the baby girls. The photographs, too, were similar superficially—the same photographer’s name imprinted on photos of baby girls with hair styled the same way. The parallel structure of the two passages mirrors the parallel placement of the two photographs. As the identities of the subjects in the photos are merged, their histories become almost merged. The child, Annie, incorporates her sister’s story (as Sophie, who assimilates aspects of her mother’s nightmares, is symbolically pulled into the mother’s photograph). Both narrators perceive themselves entering into another’s history through an altered state of consciousness. Sophie dissociates; the child, Annie hallucinates.

While the first part of Ernaux’s journey back, initiated by the photograph, related the child’s state of simultaneously knowing and not knowing, in this stage of her journey—prompted by the story—she knows; she must know. The story she hears about her sister’s death—when she is ten years old—changes what she already knew before about her own close call with death, altering her perception of her own history. The trauma of hearing the story—the story that brings the knowledge that she can no longer avoid knowing—that she is the replacement child—leads to a hallucination that is stronger than reality.

Trauma disrupts the normal flow of time and sequence of events. Ernaux conveys this by gradually moving from the sequential narrative form of the first paragraph to fragments of memories of events that occurred at different times to a complete reversal of time order. She becomes the dead child; she disappears. The story she overhears about her prehistory not only overshadows her experience, it annihilates her. (Like Annie’s hallucination, Sophie’s split-off
state—in which she saves Martine from the rapist—is self-annihilating; Sophie—becomes a shadow on the wall.) Paradoxically, Annie’s death in the hallucination is also a manifestation of a wish to be the preferred child, the dead child. Ernaux says, “j’ai failli mourir” twice in this passage—once in the first paragraph where the phrase is grounded in chronological time and once in the final paragraph where time is reversed. When Ernaux first uses it, it means I almost died. In the second instance, it also conveys its literal meaning, I failed to die. Through the hallucination, the altered story, Annie succeeds; she dies metaphorically.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* the narrator refers to a doll in order to illustrate Martine’s attempt to transmit testimony and to change history. In the presence of her adolescent daughter, Martine gets the doll (a substitute for baby Sophie) ready for bedtime—dressing it in pajamas, combing its hair and placing it in Sophie’s bed—symbolically demonstrating the nurturing behavior she could not carry out in the past. Furthermore, Martine is enacting a desire to return to her own childhood in order to locate and protect a pre-traumatized self. In *L’Autre fille*, the doll, Bernadette, plays a role in Annie’s transformation of history. When Annie contracts tetanus, the doctor administers large doses of a serum with the hope that it would be effective but forewarning the parents, “si elle ne desserre pas les dents d’ici ce soir elle est perdue” (30). At home Ernaux’s mother adds her own remedy: pouring water from Lourdes between the child’s clenched teeth. Later that year, Ernaux’s mother makes a pilgrimage to Lourdes in gratitude for her child’s miraculous recovery. When she returns, she gives Annie a gift—a doll named Bernadette. In the first narrative (about Annie’s illness and recovery) the child recalls positive aspects of this object. This was a doll that could really walk! (“Elle m’a rapporté une poupée qui marchait toute seule et qu’on a appelée Bernadette” 30). However, her reception of the story that

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69 Schwab’s discussion of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* elucidates this paradox. She argues that “[t]he replacement child confronts the bitter irony that the ideal child is a dead child” and that Art’s “tacit competition with a dead sibling [his brother Richieu] is a classical syndrome of replacement children” (281).
traumatizes her changes her perception of the doll. “[J]e revois Bernadette” has two meanings. The child sees the doll again; she sees the doll differently. She observes, not what the doll can do, but what the doll cannot do (sit) – as she now sees herself in terms of what she is not and what she cannot do. She is not as nice as her sister. She does not play because her legs, encumbered by casts, prevent her from walking. The significance of the object changes. At first, the doll is associated with her recovery and with her mother’s love; now it is associated with a mother’s rejection. What was a gift of life becomes a gift of symbolic death with the story that makes her an excluded object (celle-là). Furthermore, the doll now plays a role in Annie’s assimilation of her sister. The doll was named for St. Bernadette of Lourdes who saw visions of the Madonna. Before she died, the sister said, “je vais aller voir la Sainte Vierge et le bon Jésus” and the mother compares her to a little saint. The doll becomes a substitute for the dead, sainted sister as well as a stand-in for an almost dead Annie, stiffened by tetanus and finally (in the hallucination) dead from tetanus instead of cured of it. Thus, the object, now seen in a different way, helps to propel the narrative towards a reversal of time and of history.

Yet the dichotomy between the two sisters persists as well as the question, why did the good one die and the bad one live? “Et seul compte ce que le premier récit, celui de ma mort annoncée et de ma résurrection a fait au second, celui de ta mort et de mon indignité….toî la bonne fille, la petite sainte, tu n’as pas été sauvée, moi le démon j’étais vivante. Plus que vivante, miraculée” (34). The link between her story and the sister’s story engenders a feeling of shame (indignité). Like some survivors of traumatic events, who believe that they were chosen to survive for a purpose, the narrator concludes that she survived because she was destined to become a writer. “Il fallait donc que tu meurs à six ans pour que je vienne au monde et que je sois sauvée. Orgueil et culpabilité d’avoir été, dans un dessein illisible, choisie pour vivre….Je
n’écris pas parce que tu es morte. Tu es morte pour que j’écrive, ça fait une grande différence” (34-35). The narrator lurches from one extreme to the other—from shame to excessive pride. The grandiosity she assumes through applying the words of Claudel—“Oui, je crois que je ne suis pas venu au monde pour rien et qu’il y avait en moi quelque chose dont le monde ne pouvait se passer”—to herself—is the other side of feeling small, unworthy and excluded. At each pole, she is convinced of its veracity. At this point in her journey, she has not yet moved from her initial reaction at hearing the story at the traumatic moment. Her relationship to her sister is still perceived in terms of dichotomies and extreme oppositions such as either/or, life/death, good/bad, saint/devil and now, shame/pride.

More photos usher in another stage of her journey. After her mother’s death, cousins give her photographs in which the sister is about four to six years old. The narrator observes, “presque toujours, tu baisses la tête en grimaçant ou tu te protèges les yeux de ton bras, comme si la lumière te faisait mal, que tu ne puisses pas la supporter. Dans une lettre récente, ma cousine C., qui l’a constaté aussi, en déduit: ‘elle n’a pas l’air de s’aimer’” (36). The observation of the older cousin—who had known Ginette—causes Ernaux to question what she took for granted: a child so deeply loved and mourned by her parents, must have been happy. In addition, she believed that her sister, the good child, was like a saint and saints are happy. As a child, Ernaux’s only exposure to the sister as a four to six year old child was via a retouched head shot situated on the mantelpiece next to statues and pictures of saints. The retouched photo makes her look older and it does not reveal vulnerability. Aspects of the photographs she receives later—particularly the child’s gestures—touch her. Previously, there was only the baby picture—that was also supposed to be Annie—and the retouched photo of the child-as-saint. The photos received from the cousins help to establish a chronology for a real child. The story Annie overheard at age ten, that
is embedded in the fixed traumatic scene, is starting to move in a different direction as a result of her encounter with these photographs.

The narrator feels shame again:

   Horreur et culpabilité de surprendre en moi cette pensée sauvage que, ça se voit, tu n’étais pas faite pour la vie, ta mort était programmée dans l’ordinateur de l’univers…Honte de sentir en moi ressurgir la croyance, il fallait que tu meures, que tu sois sacrifiée pour que je vienne au monde.

   Il n’y a pas eu de prédestination. Seulement une épidémie de diphtérie et tu n’étais pas vaccinée. Suivant Wikipedia, le vaccin a été rendu obligatoire le 25 novembre 1938. Tu es morte sept mois avant. (37)

However, now shame is part of a narrative that is moving from extraordinary to commonplace through the use of a vocabulary that progresses from phenomenal (l’ordinateur de l’univers) to prosaic (seulement, Wikipedia) and by placing the child’s illness and death within the broader context of history. Her sister was not a saint; she was a child. Cosmic forces did not cause her sister’s death and the narrator’s birth; it was chance.

   Because Ernaux’s parents wanted only one child, Annie was born because her sister died. Sophie was conceived as a result of rape that caused her mother’s breakdown and ultimately led to her suicide. The narrators of both texts exist because of another’s annihilation. Each one must acknowledge a tragic bond, yet must separate her life from another’s death. Sophie’s act—running from the cemetery and entering into the cane field, beating the stalks and tearing up the roots—liberates her from repeating her mother’s history. Ernaux grapples with her sister’s death and her own survival by symbolically entering into a drawing by Reiser entitled, Le pont des enfants perdus which she describes:
on voit, de dos, un homme qui conduit un enfant par la main sur un long pont étroit, sans garde-fou, au-dessus d’un abîme. Derrière eux, à droite, le pont est entaillé ouvert sur le vide. Devant eux, à gauche, du côté de l’enfant, une faille identique. Observant les empreintes des pas – celles de l’adulte, encadrées par celles de deux enfants—on comprend que le père a déjà lâché un premier enfant dans l’abîme et qu’il s’apprête à faire de même pour le second un peu plus loin, tandis que lui-même poursuivra tranquillement sa traversée jusqu’au bout. (38-39)

The narrator establishes a link between the two children through the same parent; the surviving child still holds onto the parent’s hand. The children are also connected through danger. There is no guard rail; neither the sister nor Annie had been vaccinated against the lethal diseases that killed one (diphtheria) and almost killed the other (tetanus). The image of the father who fails to protect his child at a dangerous crossing recalls the scene in *Un Secret* where Echo, the dog who Maxime had let off his leash, is hit by a car. Maxime, who was not with Simon at the demarcation line between the occupied and free zones, revisits his son’s death when the dog dies.

In Grimbert’s text, Maxime feels guilt and remorse while the narrator serves as an empathic witness who helps his father to differentiate between the present event for which he bears responsibility and Simon’s deportation, which was not his fault. In contrast, in Ernaux’s text, it is the narrator who feels fear and abandonment as she attempts to separate her survival from her sister’s death.

The breaks in the bridge’s framework recall the effects of trauma upon the structure of a life forever undermined by the before/after quality of its encounter with death (the abyss). The language employed by the narrator to describe the visual image resonates with the traumatic

70 « Il m’a dit qu’Echo était mort par sa faute. Je me suis entendu lui dire que c’était vrai, qu’il était responsable de cela, mais de cela seulement » (Grimbert. *Un Secret* 171).
ruptures in her history and prehistory. *Entailler* recalls the tearing quality of *déchirer*, which she used to describe the internal impact of the story she overheard when she was ten years old. *Une faille identique* re-introduces the doubling motif via repeated ruptures. However *faille*, which shares the same root as *faillir*, echoes the phrase used earlier--“j’ai failli mourir.” It is doubling that differentiates. The print captures the in-between moment. One child (the sister) has died; the other child (Annie) could die. The doubling takes on a different quality here. The narrator does not double with the sister (as she had in the first set of photographs). Instead, she doubles with the child who has not (yet) died while the sister doubles with the child who has died. The imprints of the sister’s footprints that cease are separate from hers. She is beginning to establish a space between them through art. The narrator of *L’Autre fille* will not repeat her sister’s history. Belatedly, she writes the story; her imprint continues.

Ernaux continues to link the sisters while differentiating between them by referring to photographs of her parents, comparing pictures that were taken of her parents when her sister was alive to photographs taken of them during her own childhood. These photographs help to establish a chronology and to distinguish between the two sisters through their respective positions in time. The young, hopeful parents in the first photograph do not belong to Ernaux’s history. “Je n’ai pas connu la femme de ton temps à toi” (42). Instead, she knew the parents forever altered by their traumatic past.

Au commencement du mien [my time]…bien qu’ils sourient il n’y a plus rien de juvénile ni d’insouciant en eux, mais quelque chose d’amorti. Leurs traits sont marqués, alourdis…Ils ont vécu l’Exode, l’Occupation, les bombardements. Ils ont vécu ta mort. Ils sont des parents qui ont perdu un enfant.
Tu es là, entre eux, invisible. Leur douleur. (42)

The space in the text between “perdu un enfant” and “tu es là…” echoes an almost palpable emptiness. In her poignant interpretation of this photograph, the punctum is the invisible silent sorrow that overshadowed Ernaux’s childhood. In addition, the narrator uses these photographs of her parents to situate their personal trauma in relation to collective historical trauma. This inclusion is part of the process of moving the narrative from the static traumatic scene into chronological time that both moves forward and expands outward to incorporate and be included in collective history (ta mort…l’Exode…l’Occupation…les bombardements).

Through the photographs of her parents she begins to imagine what Ginette’s life was like. First she imagines what their words were to her. “Ils ont dû te dire ‘quand tu seras grande’, énumérer ce que tu pourras faire, apprendre à lire, monter à vélo, aller seule à l’école, ils t’ont dit ‘l’année prochaine’, ‘cet été’, bientôt’. Un soir, à la place de l’avenir il n’y a plus eu que le vide” (42). This was not a saint, but a little girl who looked forward to riding a bike, learning to read--a child who had a future. Furthermore, the last sentence echoes the punctum that Ernaux perceives in the photograph where emptiness replaces the future as sorrow replaces the child. Ernaux continues: “Ils ont redit les mêmes mots pour moi. J’ai eu six ans, sept ans, dix ans, je t’avais dépassée” (42). The same words said to both children continue the doubling motif. However, now the words (unlike the first set of photographs) reflect sequential rather than parallel states of being. The words are said again (redit) at a different time. There is more of a separation between her sister’s life, which ends abruptly at age six, and Ernaux’s life, which continues and crosses the bridge into adolescence and adulthood.

The photographs of her parents with their invisible bond of sorrow propel the narrator’s journey towards revisiting another childhood trauma. She recalls an event that took place during
the summer of her twelfth year. Her father’s attempt to kill her mother is the crucial shameful scene that opens Ernaux’s 1997 memoir, *La Honte*. However, this time she re-views the same incident from a perspective that includes her sibling. “Tu étais leur sacré. Ce qui les unissait plus sûrement que tout, par-delà leurs disputes et leurs scènes continuelles. En juin 1952, il l’a traînée dans la cave, il la voulait tuer. Je me suis interposée. Je ne sais si c’est à cause de moi ou de toi qu’il ne l’a pas fait. Je me souviens avoir pensé juste après *il est fou comme quand elle est morte* et lui avoir demandé en pleurant, à elle, ‘est-ce qu’il a déjà été comme ça?’ espérant qu’elle dirait oui. Elle ne m’a pas répondu” (*L’Autre fille* 50-51). In *La Honte*, there is no mention of her thoughts about her sister nor of her question to her mother. The passage demonstrates the capacity of different traumatic events to reverberate with one another as the frozen shameful scenes from her tenth year and her twelfth year touch. Memory and postmemory intersect via related phrases from each text. “Il est fou” (*L’Autre fille* 50) resonates with Annie’s hysterical cry to her father after he tried to kill her mother, “tu vas me faire gagner Malheur” (*La Honte* 15). Ernaux explains the meaning of this expression: “En normand, gagner malheur signifie devenir fou et malheureux pour toujours à la suite d’un effroi” (*La Honte* 15). Trauma is transgenerational. The father, irrevocably damaged by the event that changed his life, passes on a piece of his insanity to his daughter. Indeed, during the summer of 1952 Ernaux believed that she was going crazy. When the mother’s remark after the incident, “allons c’est fini” (*La Honte* 15) is re-read intertextually, it hovers eerily as a negative echo of the narrator’s statement about the effect of the story she overheard about her sister’s death, “il me semble que les paroles déchirent une zone crépusculaire, me happent et c’en est fini” (*L’Autre fille* 15). Like the mute, spreading flame to which Ernaux refers in *L’Autre fille*, the silenced, buried rupture permeates a life.
The narrator recognizes that she can never know her sister, even through stories that could have been, but were not, passed down to her nor can she find her through writing. “Tu es une forme vide impossible à remplir d’écriture” (54). She must look for her elsewhere. Ultimately she turns to art forms that touched her as a child, most notably through an intertextual reference to Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Plutôt qu’en moi, peut-être devrais-je te chercher hors de moi, dans ces filles que j’aurais voulu être, ces élèves des classes supérieures…c’est redevenir l’enfant en blouse bleue du cours moyen ou de sixième qui guettait dans la cour de récréation ces déesses mystérieuses dont je n’attendais aucun regard encore moins une parole. Juste les voir.

Ou, plus sûrement, dans les scènes de romans et de films, dans les tableaux qui m’ont troublée sans savoir pourquoi – jamais oubliés. C’est sans doute là qu’il faut te chercher, dans ce répertoire personnel de l’imaginaire, illisible à tous les autres, pour te découvrir, par un travail que personne ne peut se targuer d’effectuer à notre place. Je sais déjà que c’est toi dans *Jane Eyre*, glissée dans la sage et pieuse Helen Burns, l’amie plus âgée de Jane, à la sinistre pension Blockhurst. Helen, consumée de tuberculose et que Jane, miraculeusement indemne du typhus qui décime les élèves, va retrouver un soir à l’infirmerie. Elle l’invite à venir dans son lit.

“Vous êtes venue me dire adieu? Je crois que vous arrivez juste à temps.

--Allez-vous quelque part, Helen? Allez-vous chez vous?

--Oui je vais au tombeau où j’aspire, pour l’ultime séjour.

-- Non, non, Helen!
--Mais où allez-vous Helen? Le voyez-vous? Le savez-vous?

--Je crois, j’ai la foi, je vais à Dieu.

--Où est Dieu? Qu’est-ce que Dieu?"

Au matin on arrache Jane endormie et enlacée à Helen, qui est morte. (64-65)

The section of *Jane Eyre* to which Ernaux refers combines two ways of seeking the sister because it brings together two school girls of different ages (Jane is ten; Helen is fourteen) within a work of fiction that is structured as a first-person autobiographical text. The address to the sister takes on a more intimate quality in this passage. Ernaux rarely uses the word *notre* in *L’Autre fille*; however, she uses it here to draw them together into a place that is just theirs. By reinscribing a passage from *Jane Eyre* in her own text, Ernaux endeavors to touch her own sister across time and space; she finds a literary double for her sister in Helen Burns and for herself in Jane Eyre.

The reference to Bonny in the first part of Ernaux’s text (“Tu as toujours été morte. Tu es entrée morte dans ma vie l’été de mes dix ans. Née et morte dans un récit, comme Bonny, la petite fille de Scarlett et de Rhett dans *Autant en emporte le vent*” 13) reflected the perpetual death of the sister, its abrupt and enduring impact and incorporation into the life of the narrator. In contrast, death as mediated through intertextuality with *Jane Eyre*, becomes more normalized. The verb *glisser* conveys a gentle, almost shadow-like movement. The shadow-sister slips into a character from a book that the living sister is reading. They share a space together, but there is separation. This entrance does not break through protective boundaries of self and other and it does not merge life and death. When Ernaux revisits her sister’s death through another story with which she can interact as a reader, it is a private event over which she can exercise control—unlike the overwhelming story she overheard. In this context, she creates a mutual coming
together; she approaches the shadow and the shadow approaches her. The doubling with characters from *Jane Eyre* allows Annie, as a young reader, to have a loving relationship with an older sister who is kind to her and who has qualities she admires such as a passion for reading. Ernaux was ten years old when she learned about her dead six-year-old sibling. Ginette, like Bonny, died abruptly as a young child. In Bronte’s novel, Jane is ten years old when she meets Helen, who is fourteen. Unlike Bonny, this literary sister does not die before Ernaux gets a chance to know her.

The act of inscribing this passage from Brontë’s text into *L'Autre fille* allows Ernaux’s narrator to rework the frozen scene from her tenth year. In contrast to the suspended moment, the held breath, of the traumatic scene that was conveyed partly by withholding punctuation, the dialogue in this excerpt uses punctuation marks to indicate pauses. It breathes, it moves. In the first story, it is Ernaux’s mother who attends her dying six-year-old child. This final parting is between two close friends who are almost like sisters. Helen’s words, “je vais à Dieu,” are similar to Ginette’s. Yet, unlike Ginette, Helen is portrayed as pious, but not saintly. Later, in the same scene from *Jane Eyre*, Helen expresses a more nuanced view of heaven which she calls a region of happiness. The intertextuality, then, allows for a modification of extreme religiosity.

In addition, Jane is an orphan; Helen’s mother is dead and her indifferent father has abandoned her to an institution. She even states that he will not mourn her death (unlike Ernaux’s father who was inconsolable when his first daughter died). The story the narrator overheard at age ten omitted her from a family constellation consisting of her parents and sister. This excerpt, which features her literary counterpart and leaves out the parents, is a revisiting that propels Ernaux’s text from a narrative of exclusion to a narrative of inclusion.

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71 Ginette says, “je vais aller voir la Sainte Vierge et le bon Jésus.”
72 Helen says, “I leave no one to regret me much: I have only a father; and he is lately married, and will not miss me” (*Jane Eyre* 117).
Although neither Jane nor Helen has a mother, there is a significant maternal figure. A teacher, Miss Temple, takes an interest in both girls. Ernaux and her sister, through their literary counterparts, can share and be nurtured by the same mother at the same point in time and space. (The scene where Miss Temple invites both girls to her room for afternoon tea is an example). This provides a means of bridging a gap expressed earlier, “Je n’ai pas connu la femme [la mère] de ton temps à toi” (42). That same space, the symbolic mother’s bedroom, provides another point of intersection with the story that Ernaux overheard as a child. Contrary to Ernaux’s statement in the above passage, Helen’s sickbed is not in the infirmary; it is in Miss Temple’s room. Jane slips in at night while the attending nurse dozes and Miss Temple is in the sick ward caring for some of the children who have typhus. The scene mirrors the spatial set-up that existed in Ernaux’s home where the little rosewood bed in which the sister died (the same bed in which Ernaux slept as a young child) was in the parents’ bedroom.

The intertextuality indirectly allows for a symbolic reversal of shame. In Brontë’s novel, Jane has character traits that allow her to adapt more readily to the harsh institution where they live. She is neat and can concentrate her attention upon assigned tasks while Helen is more of a dreamer and sometimes forgets to attend to details such as keeping her drawer tidy. Humiliated for this oversight by a teacher who requires her to wear a sign that says Slattern, Helen wears the sign all day without complaining until Jane tears it off and throws it into the fire. In this context, the sister is not perfect; rather she bears the shameful mark—not Ernaux’s literary counterpart, Jane. Moreover, this sign can be contested because it is out in the open. As a child, Ernaux could not directly express anger about being labeled not as good as her deceased saintly sister because Ginette’s life and death was a family secret.
The death scene from *Jane Eyre* resonates with both the sister’s death as related in the mother’s story and ten-year-old Annie’s hallucination wherein she died instead of her sibling. Jane, like Annie is the stronger child; she endures. Helen and Jane say good night and go to sleep but only one of them will awaken. According to Cathy Caruth, leaving the trauma is traumatic; letting it go is painful. Ernaux’s use of *arracher*—“…on arrache Jane endormie et enlacée à Helen, qui est morte”—in her interpretation of Brontë’s text, reflects the difficulty of separating her own survival from her sister’s death. However, the protagonist’s recollection of the moment of separation in *Jane Eyre* differs.

When I awoke it was day; an unusual movement roused me; I looked up; I was in somebody’s arms; the nurse held me; she was carrying me through the passage back to the dormitory. I was not reprimanded for leaving my bed; people had something else to think about: no explanation was afforded then to my many questions; but a day or two afterwards I learned that Miss Temple, on returning to her own room at dawn, had found me laid in a little crib; my face against Helen Burns’s shoulder, my arms round her neck. I was asleep, and Helen was—dead.

Her grave is in Brocklebridge churchyard: for fifteen years after her death it was only covered by a grassy mound; but now a grey marble tablet marks the spot, inscribed with her name, and the word “Resurgam.” (*Jane Eyre* 119)

There is no mention of anyone tearing Jane away from Helen and there is no indication that the unusual movement was abrupt or shocking. Ernaux’s choice of *arracher* rather than a more neutral term such as *détacher* conveys the wrenching aspect of leaving the traumatic moment. Furthermore, it recalls her use of *déchirer* in reference to the internal tearing caused by hearing
the mother’s story of her sister’s death. The tearing in the earlier passage created an internal wound that incorporated the dead sister, like an unbearable weight, into the life of the living child. In contrast, the use of *arracher* in this context refers to an external act that separates life from death and differentiates between them. The above passage from *Jane Eyre* communicates the delayed nature of consciously knowing the traumatic event. Because she was asleep, Jane could witness neither the point in time when Helen passed from life to death nor the moment of separation from her. Jane wakes up to this knowledge belatedly (a day or two later).

The words on Ginette’s tombstone, “décédée le Jeudi-Saint 1938,” recall the narrator’s thoughts about her first literary sister, Bonny—“tu es entrée morte dans ma vie.” There is no birth date and therefore no sense of a lifespan that contains a story. The Latin word *resurgam* means *I shall rise again*; it can also take on the subjunctive sense, *let me rise again.* Although *resurgam* is used in a specifically religious context in *Jane Eyre*, its meaning as well as its belated placement on an unmarked grave (fifteen years after Helen’s death) resonate with the progression of the narrator’s journey in Part 2 of *L’Autre fille*. This inscription, like this revisiting, opens up the possibility of movement that integrates the past into a continuum joined to the present and future. Through identification with the protagonist of Brontë’s book--by befriending the sister she never knew and comforting her in her dying--the narrator of *L’Autre fille* allows the burden deep inside of her to emerge.

In Part 3, Ernaux’s journey back progresses in another direction where there will be neither twinning with the dead nor with literary doubles. It begins with a description of a photograph of her father, his niece in her communion dress and five-year-old Ginette.

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73 In addition, it resonates with the words of Kafka’s father, “I will tear you apart like a fish” from Kafka’s “Letter To His Father.” Ernaux refers to this work in *L’Autre fille*.
74 I am grateful to Prof. Yvonne Bernardo, Department of Classical and Oriental Studies, Hunter College of the City University of New York, for her translation of *resurgam*. 
J'ai devant moi une photo que ma cousine C. m’a envoyée il y a vingtaine d’années. Vous êtes trois sur un trottoir, à l’angle de deux rues. Mon père, grand, souriant, en costume croisé, foncé, très endimanché, un chapeau à la main (je ne lui ai connu que des berets)…. Derrière le groupe, sur le mur, une affiche aux grosses lettres lisibles, \textit{La vie chère – Réformes sociales dans l’alimentation – Augmentation de salaires – Les congés payés – Les 40 heures}.

La photo a été prise au Havre en 1937. Tu as cinq ans. Il te reste un an à vivre.\textsuperscript{75}

Je regarde ton visage sérieux, tes doigts écartés par jeu, tes jambes frêles. Sur la photo, tu cesses d’être l’ombre maléfique de mon enfance. Tu n’es plus la sainte. Tu es une petite fille sortie brutalement du temps dans une épidémie de diphtérie, arrachée de la surface d’un monde qui, en cette minute, ce jour-là, de fête, avait la forme et la substance d’un trottoir large à bordure de ciment dans un quartier populaire du Havre. \textsuperscript{76}

The narrator uses the photograph to grapple with the question of history. She revisits it two decades after her mother’s death—the event that irrevocably obliterated all of the unspoken

\textsuperscript{75} The use of the backshadowing here is similar to the passage in \textit{Un Secret} where the narrator contemplates and is deeply moved by the photograph of his dead sibling, Simon. “J’avais glissé dans ma poche l’une des photos de l’album qui s’était décolleté, au dos de laquelle une date était inscrite: on l’y voyait en short et en maillot, au gard-à-vous devant un champ de blé, plissant les yeux face au soleil de son dernier été” (162). Both passages evoke the impact of the anterior future discussed by Barthes: \textit{“This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake”} (\textit{Camera Lucida} 96).

\textsuperscript{76} Ginette, who walked on the streets of Le Havre with her parents before the bombings that destroyed a huge part of it, belonged to the world before the historical schism of World War II. A vocabulary that denotes the abrupt, disastrous impact of trauma and its aftermath is evident in the passage by Jean-Philippe Damais that describes the bombing of Le Havre. “Comme beaucoup d’autres villes françaises, Le Havre a été profondément touché par la dernière guerre. Mais l’ampleur du désastre, sa soudaineté aussi l’ont marqué d’une certaine originalité. Certes durant toute la guerre les bombardements succédèrent aux bombardements. Pourtant aucun ne fut aussi violent, aussi irrémédiable, aussi vaste que celui du 5 septembre 1944 qui d’un coup réduisait à néant tout ce qui avait été le Vieux Havre, transformant en un chaos de ruines les habitations de près de 47,000 personnes sur plus de 150 hectares” (Damais 9). The pre-war photograph and the knowledge of what will happen/what has happened provides an overlap between personal and collective history, linking the child’s sudden death (within hours of becoming ill) in 1938 that shattered the family and landscape demolished in 1944.
parental memories about Ginette. She uses the image, with its silenced voices, to establish separation between herself and her sister. At this particular moment in the present, she gazes at a specific family photograph from a time that preceded her birth. The unit, *vous êtes trois*, does not include her. This is quite different from her memory of the two baby pictures placed side by side where there was confusion about the identity of the two children and their relative placement in time and space. Although the narrator is not part of this family constellation, she no longer expresses feelings of exclusion or of shame and she no longer compares herself to her sister. Furthermore, this photograph—unlike any of the previous photos—places Ginette’s existence within the context of French history through its date and via the signs in the background advocating worker’s rights. The signs in the background and the description of the father’s appearance resonate with Ernaux’s earlier comments about photographs of her parents from the same pre-war period when they were young, hopeful and enthusiastic about Le Front populaire, the movement that advocated reforms such as the forty hour week and paid vacations. The use of backshadowing—“…1937…il te reste un an à vivre”--establishes, time as the *punctum*; it conveys the power of the photograph to simultaneously contain life and death--what was and what will be.

Now that they are clearly distinct beings, the narrator explores a different way to touch the sister across time and space. During this stage of her journey, she does not need to seek her sister outside of herself via art and literature. She is ready to look within herself. The narrator’s encounter with this particular photograph, with its specificity of space, sets off a process that allows history and pre-history to converge. Like Modiano, Ernaux remembers shared spaces. She recalls a flood of images from her early childhood in Lillebonne (before the family moved to Yvetot in 1945) that center around home, family and community. Most are visual but some
include other senses such as the sounds of her mother’s and father’s voices—of being lulled to sleep by the songs they liked to sing. These are places and images that both she and her sister occupied, saw and experienced at different points in time; they provide a link. The narrator no longer needs to use doubling (“je croyais toujours être le double d’une autre vivant dans un autre endroit” 45) to twin with a deceased sister nor negation (“pour être, il a fallu que je te nie” 71) in order to avoid exclusion. Instead she says: “L’une et l’autre nous avons émergé à la conscience au milieu du même monde” (70). They are separate beings who share common origins. The coordinating conjunction, *et* indicates change from a previous way of perception often expressed via *ou*—one or the other—as well as through oppositions such as angel/devil, good/bad and life/death. In addition, this statement differs markedly from the ten-year-old’s reaction to the story—“tu es entrée morte dans ma vie.” Through her journey, the narrator’s perception of the sister has evolved away from a dead weight lodged within her, received as a sudden blow in a scene that remains frozen. Instead, the phrase *émergé dans* reflects gentle movement. This shared movement toward life and consciousness (*la conscience du même monde*) rather than towards death conveys mutuality of space rather than invasion through protective boundaries.

In the final stage of her journey back in *L’Autre fille* Ernaux relates the desire she experienced to return to the place of mutual origins—the house in Lillebonne. She recalls that she had passed through Lillebonne several years earlier, seen the outside of the house, but felt no need to enter. Like Sophie, in Danticat’s novel, who runs past the cane field on her first trip back to Haiti, but who does not enter into that critical space until a subsequent visit, Ernaux looks at the exterior but could not yet enter into the interior (72). She uses the phrase, *l’une et l’autre*, again when she relates her visit back to see the inside of the house where both of them were born—and in particular, the bedroom where both of them slept in the same little rosewood bed
placed parallel to the parents’ bed—“la chambre où tout a commencé pour l’une et pour l’autre, l’une après l’autre” (75). Now she adds the conjunction, après, which adds the dimension of sequential time. It differs markedly from traumatic time as represented by the vision she experienced at age ten where time and fate are reversed—where she enters into prehistory, dies instead of her sister and sees her sister sleeping in her bed.

The frame and fixed image motif recurs in this final section. Even after a span of six decades (Ernaux had not been inside of this house since 1945) and extensive renovations to the interior, the sight of the bedroom window anchors her in space: “…je ne pouvais avoir aucun doute sur l’identité de cette chambre—garantie par la présence de la fenêtre du côté de la rivière, exactement comme j’en ai toujours conservé la vision – avec celle de 1945” (75). The presence of the river, symbol of time and life flowing forward, as well as the date, help to create cohesion between past and present. Anchored by the window, the narrator can locate the space where both children slept.

Je n’avais pas de véritable pensée, juste, ‘c’est là’. J’éprouvais une sorte de sensation plénière, faite d’étonnement et de contentement obscur de me trouver là, dans ce lieu précis du monde, entre ces murs, près de cette fenêtre, d’être ce regard qui contemple la chambre où tout a commencé pour l’une et pour l’autre, l’une après l’autre. Où tout s’est joué. La chambre de la vie et de la mort qui était baignée de lumière en cette fin d’après midi. Le lieu de l’énigme du hasard. (75-76)

The revisiting (and rewriting) expressed in this passage is a healing process that ameliorates some of the damage done during the first traumatic scene. In contrast to the first scene, where the child receives an internal wound that tears her, the adult experiences a feeling
of wholeness. She has moved from the internal, shadowy place to a site where she can see clearly. The forever fixed and frozen moment has moved, becoming part of a continuum; it no longer imprisons her. Similarly, Sophie’s return to the site of life and death—her conception through rape and her mother’s destruction—liberates her from frozen moments that paralyze her life. Unlike Ernaux, Sophie does not feel contentment. Instead, when she leaves the cemetery after her mother’s funeral and runs into the field, angrily beating and uprooting the cane stalks, the daughter strikes back at history. Despite the differences, these revisitings provide transformative points of intersection between past and present for the narrators of *L’Autre fille* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

Towards the end of *L’Autre fille*, the narrator contemplates her project in relation to her next visit to the cemetery. “Dans quelques jours j’irai sur les tombes, comme d’habitude à la Toussaint. Je ne sais pas si j’aurai cette fois quelque chose à te dire, si c’est la peine. Si j’aurai de la honte ou de la fierté d’avoir écrit cette lettre, dont le désir de l’entreprendre me reste opaque” (77). Her perception of shame has changed. The text, in general, has evolved away from extreme oppositions and from questions of either/or. This passage suggests that the narrator’s relation to shame and pride has progressed in that direction too. Instead of using the term, *orgueil*, as she did previously, Ernaux uses *fierté*. Since one affective pole has moved away from grandiosity to a more modified sense of pride, perhaps the other pole, shame, has become less extreme too, that there will be no more shifting between grandiosity and humiliation, but simply acceptance of what is and what has been. The spoken words that shamed her and that wounded her internally, also imposed silence. No longer imprisoned by *la flamme muette et sans chaleur*, Ernaux breaks the silence. Through writing the letter that she will send out into the world, she grapples with images from the past, embracing and releasing the weight of buried shadows.
Chapter 4

The Journey with the Empathic Witness: Marie Cardinal’s Les Mots pour le dire and Marie-Célie Agnant’s Le Livre d’Emma

One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.


Les Mots pour le dire (1975) by Marie Cardinal and Le Livre d’Emma (2001) by Marie-Célie Agnant are stories about women who, through their extraordinary odysseys, bring embedded trauma out of their bodies and into language. Cardinal’s autobiographical novel, set in Algeria and France, was published at the height of the French feminist movement. Agnant, whose imaginary novel is set in Haiti and Montreal, is deeply influenced by the traumatic legacy of slavery in Haiti as well as by memories of her childhood lived under the Duvalier regime.77 Despite the differences in time, place and genre, there are significant similarities between these two books. In both texts the adult traveler takes the journey back to childhood in the presence of a listener who is an empathic witness to her trauma. For Marie Cardinal, it is the doctor to whom she dedicates her book.78 Through years of intensive psychoanalysis, Cardinal was able to recover from incapacitating mental and physical illness that stemmed from childhood abuse. For Emma, it is Flore, an interpreter for the psychiatric unit where Emma is incarcerated. Finding the words to say it was only possible when they found empathic witnesses.

77 In “Écrire pour tuer le vide du silence ” Agnant describes life under the Duvalier dictatorship. “Toutes ces années les gens de mon pays ont vécu avec un os en travers de la gorge, et dans la tête, des noms et des voix qui ne répondent plus. Les morts s’accumulent. En ces années de dictature, mon pays n’est qu’une vaste prison d’où nous voulons tous nous échapper” (86). See also Patricia Proulx’s interview with Agnant, “Breaking the Silence :… ”

Agnant relates that members of her family disappeared during the Duvalier regime (46).

78 “Au docteur qui m’a aidée à naître.”
Les Mots pour le dire

Les Mots pour le dire begins with the narrator’s first approach to the place where her psychoanalysis will begin. Her description of the street resonates with her situation: a dead end (l’impasse). The narrator, who is never identified by name, suffers from an indefinable illness that she calls la chose; it inhabits her like an overpowering, living being. Physical manifestations include profuse, uncontrolled uterine bleeding, elevated blood pressure and severe anxiety. Numerous treatments from physicians and consultations with specialists had not helped her; the experts often made things worse. For example, in order to consult with the psychoanalyst, the narrator courageously escaped from a hospital where doctors never listened to her and treated her with dangerous medication. She believes that psychoanalysis, the talking cure, is her last hope—the route to recovery.

Before her analysis, certain words were terrorizing, living things that she faced alone. For example, after her visit to the surgeon who recommends a hysterectomy, the narrator reflects upon his diagnosis “…je me suis précipitée dans le métro où la chose m’a emplie, enfonçant cette fois précisément ses racines dans mon utérus fibromateux. Fibromateux. Quel mot! Caverne tapissée d’algues sanguinolentes. Pertuis monstrueusement boursouflé. Crapaud pustuleux. Pieuvre.” (16). In this passage, the extreme intersects with the everyday through space, movement and linguistic usage. The narrator inhabits two places--the ordinary world (the neighborhood outside the doctor’s office and then the subway) and her terrifying inner reality. As she descends into the metro, la chose enters her innards creating a correspondence between her movement in the outside world and the world inside her. The word fibromateux carries a double and incongruous reality. As used by the surgeon, it is a neutral, objective term. Yet her expansion of the term to one that usurps her inner space relates to a subjective, monstrous reality.
where “les mots, de même que les objets vivent autant que les gens ou les animaux. Ils palpitent, ils s’évanouissent ou s’amplifient….un mot…devenait peut-être même la chose la plus importante, qui m’habitait, me torturait, ne me quittait plus…” (16). One can awaken from a nightmare and the terror dissipates, but the morning light brings her no respite. “J’ouvrais les yeux….je sentais l’heure, le soleil. Ça allait. Je remontais à la surface de ma conscience. Une seconde, deux seconds, trois peut-être: FIBROMATEUX! Splach! Étalé comme une grosse éclaboussure de peinture grasse sur un mur clair. Immédiatement venait le grelottement, avec le tambour du coeur et la sueur de la peur. C’était la journée qui commençait” (16). Cardinal’s treatment of fibromateux gives it a dreadful life of its own where it dominates, visually magnified via capitalization. The use of onomatopoeia (splach) endows it with sound and energy; it moves outward to trespass upon clean space. The imagery of the paint stain recalls the blood stains that the narrator left on furniture and the shame that led to self-imposed isolation. Both the word that splatters and her body that bleeds are forces that she cannot control. The repeated use of the past perfect tense, which conveys the continuous nature of her terror as well as the almost palpable description of her inner state help the reader to encounter strangeness. Then, the abrupt collision with ordinary temporality—the day was beginning—engenders conceptual dissonance.

No one understands what these words mean to her. No one truly listens. There is a gap between her overwhelming, undefinable experience and its misperception by others. The first symptoms—unbearable anxiety—strike when she is a university student. The mother to whom she turns for help takes a reductionist approach-- “ce n’est qu’une angoisse”-- and the doctor

79 “….ce sang le fait que je ne pouvais plus vivre avec les autres? J’avais taché tant de fauteuils, tant de chaises, tant de divans, tant de sofas, tant de tapis, tant de lits! J’avais laissé tant de flaques, flaquettes, gouttes, gouttelettes dans tant de salons, salles à manger, antichambres, couloirs, piscines, autobus, et autres lieux! Je ne pouvais plus sortir” (12-13).
they visit concurs (55-56). After the birth of her children, uncontrolled bleeding begins and the anxiety increases. She becomes more and more isolated. Her husband, Jean-Pierre, accepts employment in Canada in order to distance himself from her for most of each year. The experts who treat the physical symptoms want to solve the problem by creating another wound--a hysterectomy for a thirty-year-old. She rejects this solution and voluntarily enters the psychiatric unit of a hospital where dangerous medication compounds her problem. The narrator compares herself to the vase on the table when the staff treats her like an object that is scrutinized, manipulated and inanimate (they do not consult her, yet they speak about her in her presence). The hospital episode continues the theme of imprisonment. Now she is not only possessed by la chose, but held hostage by doctors’ diagnoses and medications. However, her life force is strong; she will not be held captive. Because she is no longer allowed to leave the premises without permission, her only option is to escape. Despite substantial obstacles, she accomplishes this with the help of a friend and then makes her first visit to the psychoanalyst.

Unlike the doctors in the psychiatric unit, the psychoanalyst treats her with respect and above all, he listens intently. The narrator responds through her body. “Tout mon corps s’est détendu….Peut-être y avait-il un chemin entre moi et quelqu’un d’autre…Si je pouvais parler à quelqu’un qui m’écoute vraiment!” (34) In addition, the analyst does not try to encapsulate her illness within a diagnosis. When she asks, what is wrong with me? he replies: “Vous êtes fatiguée, troublée. Je crois que je peux vous aider” (37). His response creates a sense of future and hope. These are words that liberate instead of imprison.
Finding a bridge

A path is being opened; yet the narrator feels ambivalence. Her use of the conditional tense as well as the term peut-être suggest a sense of possibility. There is fear and hope but not firm belief. Furthermore, the narrator conveys the in-between state of getting ready to take those first tentative steps through her recollection of her thoughts the night before the second session. At that time she did not consciously know that the physical symptoms masked the deeper, psychic wounds. “Je n’avais pas conscience qu’en me livrant au sang je me déguisais, je masquais la chose. A certains moments ce sang maudit envahissait complètement mon existence et me laissait épuisée, encore plus fragile en face de la chose” (41). Yet, on some level, she did know. The phrase, ce sang maudit, itself, is a mask. “Maudit” contains the sounds, mots dit, suggesting that she sensed that the path towards containing the uncontrollable, self-destructive flood of blood lay in the flow of words. The narrator weaves this simultaneity of knowing and not knowing into the text with her choice of this phrase.

Unmasking

At the beginning of the second session, the narrator tells the doctor that she is bloodless (exsangue). She wants to continue on the familiar path of focusing on her bleeding body. Yet the use of exsangue also reflects an emotional state—lacking feeling or vivacity. There is a conflict between succumbing to destructive rage against herself (death by self-abortion) and her drive to be fully alive. The doctor, the attuned listener, lets her know that he sees the tortured psyche hiding behind her physical symptoms. “Ce sont des troubles psychosomatiques, cela ne m’intéresse pas.” Instead, he is interested in buried psychic wounds. “Parlez-moi d’autre chose;”

80 The narrator’s mother tried to induce a miscarriage when she was pregnant. According to Bettleheim the child, who identifies with the mother, internalizes the death wish; as an adult, she acts it out by bleeding. See Bettleheim 300-303.
the phrase that follows, is his first gesture towards them (41). His response contains both the unexceptional (d’autre chose) and an allusion to psychosis (la chose—her term for her illness) as well as the possibility of accessing the latter through the former. Between her words and his response, there is a bridge, but it is difficult to begin to cross it. The narrator experiences the doctor’s reply as a slap (un gifle) and she is furious.81 The verbal slap forces Cardinal’s narrator to move from a familiar quagmire where she is hiding alone to a deeper place and to recognize that the witness knows that this place exists and he will go there with her. Despite her anger, the narrator ventures towards revealing the initial layer behind the bleeding--her fear. When she talks about it, she releases life affirming tears that nourish her and displace the fluids that drain her. Indeed, after the session she discovers that the bleeding has stopped. Like the case related by Dori Laub where the Israeli man, a child survivor of the Holocaust, stops the death machine that plagued his nightmares when he establishes a link to an authentic listener and allows himself to feel fear, Cardinal’s death machine (uncontrollable bleeding) ceases when she opens up to an addressable other and faces her underlying fears in his presence.82 In this situation, the empathic listener is a catalyst who, through his holding presence, enables Cardinal’s narrator to begin the process of unlayering that leads to the buried wounds.

The holding presence of the witness, a central component of the relationship that makes the journey possible, is established at the second session. “J’étais bien là, comme un enfant repu dans son berceau, les lèvres encore pleines de lait, envahi par la torpeur de la digestion, protégé par le regard de sa mère…J’ai senti dans le fin fond de moi que j’allais peut-être trouver le

81 This verbal slap bears similarity to the slap administered by the Japanese man to the French woman in Hiroshima mon amour. The French woman was paralyzed in a zone with the dead. See Caruth’s analysis of Hiroshima mon amour in “Literature and the Enactment of Memory: Duras, Resnais, Hiroshima mon amour” 25-26.

82 I am referring to the case of the Israeli man who, as a four-year-old child, had to fend for himself in the streets of Krakow, Poland during World War II. His parents were deported to a concentration camp. See the introduction where I relate aspects of Laub’s discussion.
moyen de tuer la chose” (42). The narrator uses a vocabulary of well-being, nourishment and protection that stems from being heard. The witness becomes transformed into the mother’s gaze from which, in turn, the daughter draws her own strength from deep inside herself. The holding presence continues throughout the analysis, but the metaphors change. At a much later point in her journey, the narrator says, “le petit docteur est mon garde-fou et le témoin de mes voyages dans l’inconscient” (195). The railing provides protection; yet it corresponds to a different kind of holding.83 This is no longer the mother gazing at the baby in the cradle, but the mother helping the child to walk, to establish equilibrium and to explore. The working bond that develops between the narrator and her doctor makes it possible for her to venture into unknown territories where she could not go alone, to touch the long-buried wounds from childhood.

The journey

The tools that make the journey possible are words. “Chaque mot est important,” urges the doctor. They are the keys that unlock the doors to the past. Words share some of the characteristics of testimonial objects and at times, the narrator describes them as objects. They serve as points of witnessing. As the doctor encourages her to tell her what comes to mind with particular words, associative links form that lead to aspects of childhood trauma. A special lexicon develops between the two where certain words (such as tuyau and œil) contain ordinary meanings as well as meanings particular to her childhood experience.

There are other words that Cardinal does not explicitly identify as being part of the vocabulary shared by doctor and patient but which, nevertheless, serve as key points of witnessing in the textual representation of the narrator’s journey. As a child, she was haunted by

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83 This metaphor recalls and contrasts with the absence of guardrails in Ernaux’s description of Reiser’s drawing, _Le Pont des enfants perdus_, in _L’Autre fille_ 38-39.
a secret from her mother’s past. The mother was traumatized by her first baby’s death from tuberculosis that was transmitted by her husband. Years later she becomes pregnant while she is in the process of obtaining a divorce. The mother’s attempts to cause a miscarriage through methods such as horseback riding and taking pills fail and she gives birth to another daughter, the narrator. Although the child knew about her sister’s death and about her parents’ divorce, she was not supposed to know about the attempts to abort her until the mother tells her when she is an adolescent in order to warn her about the consequences of sex.

**Between telling and not telling**

When she is a child, the mother warns her about swallowing seeds, an indirect and hateful way of telling her about her own unwanted conception.

Etant enfant ma mère m’avait dit: « Si tu avales un noyau de cerise, il te poussera un cerisier dans le ventre ». J’en déduisais que si j’avalais un pépin de raisin il me pousserait de la vigne, un noyau d’abricot, un abricotier, etc. Je mangeais mes fruits avec la plus grande attention et si par Malheur, il m’arrivait de laisser passer un noyau, je ne parvenais plus à m’endormir. Je sentais l’arbre qui poussait en moi, je m’attendais d’une minute à l’autre à voir des branches chargées de fruits surgir par mes narines, mes oreilles, ma bouche, je sentais mes doigts se transformer en racines. Finalement je vomissais et je trouvais enfin le sommeil.

(90)

The swallowed seeds serve as objects around which the narrator can transmit the child’s state of unconsciously knowing about her mother’s unwanted pregnancy. The child identifies with the mother since the seed that usurps her own body is like the growing life inside her mother that her
The capitalization of Malheur and the phrase that follows underscores her fear of losing control as well as the knowledge that she is not yet ready to acknowledge: her conception was her mother’s misfortune. She sprang from the unwanted seed planted by the desired but hated husband, the forbidden fruit. The child’s vomiting is an early form of aborting herself—as the uncontrolled bleeding was a form of self-abortion. The narrator does not directly state the role of seeds in transmitting the simultaneity of knowing and not knowing to the reader. Rather, she weaves the impact of this early story into other parts of the text through related vocabulary such as in phrases that use the concept of taking root (la chose takes root) and in related internal bodily states such as the invasive fibrous tissue.

**Recovering the internal witness**

At a later point in her journey, vocabulary related to seeds sets off a search for what Dori Laub calls the internal witness or the *inner thou* (Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle” 70-71). The narrator recalls her endeavor to locate the embryo inside her that was not always sick. “…qu’il existait en moi un embryon caché que je pouvais retrouver et à partir duquel je m’épanourais. Je cherchais à préciser comment et pourquoi j’étais devenue une malade mentale” (196). The embryo is both the hidden healthy part of her psyche as well as the seed from which her text grows. The use of the verb épanouir indicates health and vitality that contrasts with destructive intrusion in the earlier passage. Unlike the harmful seeds and fibroids that usurped her body and caused uncontrollable ejection of liquids (vomit and blood), this is a wanted seed that she nurtures. A vocabulary of mindfulness (*chercher, préciser, pourquoi*) underscores this conscious endeavor. The use of the verb caché in this passage continues the pattern of masking and unmaking that was introduced in the early encounter with the doctor that
established him as an authentic listener. He remains a necessary component of progress as indicated by the metaphor of the doctor as guard rail which appears shortly before the above passage. Because she is stronger now, she is capable of exercising more agency. She needs the guard rail, but it is she, not the doctor, who initiates the search for her internal witness. The narrator continues: “En faisant cela j’ai mis à jour la personnalité malsaine de ma mère. Je revoyais les scènes que je vais décrire maintenant dans l’éclat de la vie. J’étais de nouveau, totalement l’enfant” (196). This section of the passage places the origins of her illness outside of her body, thereby creating a necessary separation between her mother and herself. A vocabulary of seeing and conscious description (mettre à jour, revoir, décrire) relates to the internal witness who perceives, and of contact between the narrator-as-child and the narrator-as-adult. It places her history on a more chronological continuum stemming from her pre-history.

A critical scene re-introduces the theme of ingesting unwanted substances. The mother requires her daughter to swallow soup she hates. When the child regurgitates it, the mother forces her to eat her own vomit. She complies because she recognizes that her mother is crazy and dangerous. “Alors j’ai mangé toute seule mon vomi de soupe et je l’ai fait non pas pour lui plaire mais parce que je sentais en elle quelque chose de dangereux, de malade, quelque chose de plus fort qu’elle et de plus fort que moi, quelque chose de plus épouvantable que le marchand d’hui” (200). The terms quelque chose, l’autre chose and d’autre chose in Cardinal’s text sometimes lead to either aspects of la chose or to some form of insight. Here the repeated use of quelque chose introduces the mother’s psychosis as perceived by the child. She faces this terrifying insight by identifying separate characteristics (quelque chose de….) that will adhere around the term la chose later in the chapter. It is a way of using language to organize chaos. In addition, by naming her mother’s psychosis la chose she turns it into an entity that she can
separate from the mother she needs. This episode is an event without an outside witness because, although others are present, no one sees the psychosis except the child and no one objects. The bizarre nature of the event is compounded by its aftermath; the episode is recounted within the family many times (as humorous!) and the adults always conclude that the mother was fair (juste 200).

The narrator discerns a split. There are two little girls. “Cette petite fille qui ressuscitait lentement sur le divan du docteur était différente de la petite fille dont j’avais gardé le souvenir au cours de ma maladie….l’une était obéissante, confite dans l’amour de sa mère, constamment aux aguets de ses propres défauts…. L’autre petite fille avait un oeil au contraire, et quel oeil!…..Un oeil surtout, qui était sensible à la chose….un oeil qui avait vu la chose dans sa mère” (217). Unlike the earlier scene, where the child does not consciously grasp the hostility behind her mother’s warning about swallowed seeds, this little girl does understand. The second little girl is the inner witness who sees. The use of the verb ressusciter is significant because the breath that necessary for life is also needed for speech. The second girl held the life force and kept it safe by hiding. The adult narrator needs to articulate the suppressed story and re-integrate that split-off part of herself in order to live her life.

**Buried truth**

Cardinal’s search for hidden truth is a recurrent theme in *Les Mots pour le dire*. An episode that occurs earlier in the text concerns the child’s quest for buried treasure that will make her mother love her.

J’aurais voulu lui faire du bien, j’aurais voulu la rendre heureuse, j’aurais voulu attirer son attention. Je me promettais de trouver un trésor pour elle.
Ce trésor j’y pensais tellement que, pendant les siestes, je me mettais à en transpirer d’excitation. C’est dans la terre qu’on trouve les pierres précieuses. Alors je sortais…. et je partais dans les vignes. Accroupie, je grattais le sol. Je grattais jusqu’à ce que cela me fasse mal, jusqu’à avoir l’impression que mes ongles se décollaient. Je cherchais des cailloux qui ne ressemblaient pas aux autres. J’en emplissais mes poches. Là-dedans il y avait peut-être bien des diamants, des émeraudes, des rubis. Quelle surprise elle aurait! Son visage se détendrait, elle m’embrasserait, elle m’aimerait.” (85-86)

The passage that the adult narrator constructs integrates the child’s poignant longing for her mother’s love with the adult woman’s pain. Her initial reflections, which set off an associative process to this passage about her voluntary search for pebbles (cailloux), are about blood including large clots (caillots) that were involuntarily ejected from her body (79). She digs in mother earth hoping to find the unique gem that represents her. The child, who identifies her pockets (poches) with her mother’s uterus, fills them with pebbles. At the same time, the word poche recalls an earlier mention of the adult’s fibrous uterus that the surgeon wanted to remove: “Je ne voulais pas qu’on m’enlève cette poche et ces deux boules” (15). The address to herself, to her internal thou, expressed through the use of the reflexive verb me promettre precedes the child’s attempt to empower herself by setting up conditions. In addition to digging in the earth for pebbles, she looks inside (and tears apart) womb-like objects (the reproductive parts of flowers) convinced that she will find jewels, maybe even mandarin buttons that her mother likes, inside them.

The mother scolds her for tearing flowers apart and rejects the pebbles. “Ne laisse pas trainer ces saletés dans la maison’” (86). The child remarks upon the mother’s collection of
costly mandarin buttons (86). She cannot afford to buy one from a shop where they are on display behind glass windows—inaccessible like her mother’s love. “Je prenais conscience de ses goûts et de ses besoins….La porte de son Bonheur m’était donc fermée puisque je pensais ne pouvoir l’ouvrir qu’avec des présents. Mon amour n’était, apparemment, pas la clef qui convenait” (87). Mandarin buttons indicated rank in imperial China via nine different colors. The mother’s tastes and personal allegiance correspond to her privileged status as a member of the French bourgeoisie in Algeria—a class that would soon be expelled. These valued objects are markers of lost identities. Like the buttons displayed in the antique stores, her cherished position will be relegated to history. For the adult narrator, these objects represent failure and a broken promise to herself that persists across time and space. “Jamais ni les boutons de mandarins, ni les joyaux, ni les pépites ne sortaient complètement de mon esprit” (87). The little girl could not make her mother love her; the adult still mourns. The pebbles are not the key to maternal love because the mother’s inaccessible treasure is buried under a tombstone of precious marble. The mother’s words of love are directed to this stone, not to the living daughter who accompanies her to the cemetery and fetches water for cleaning it.

**Layered text**

The theme of excavation continues. In another section of the text, the narrator tells a series of layered stories that ultimately lead to the key traumatic event: the mother tells her daughter about her efforts to abort her. The narratives that cover the traumatic event provide a protective cushion, and this textual construction draws the reader into the process. The narrator first tells us that the mother told her these stories in the living room while they were having tea but just before she gets to the story that traumatized her, she reveals that her mother told it to her
when they were in the street. She acknowledges that she needed to create “un cadre rassurant pour soutenir le souvenir de cet unique entretien avec ma mère” (151). By first placing the telling of the stories in a safe location the narrator creates a memory that has an aura of well-being.

> On venait de nous server le thé. Il embaumait. Son odeur, mêlée à celle des Craven A que fumait ma mère et à celle des toasts chauds, forme un tout bien précis dans mes souvenirs si bien que, depuis, l’un de ces parfums rencontré n’importe où, appelle les autres et je revis encore une fois la scène: elle et moi devant le feu de bois, prenant le thé, il y a bien longtemps. Plus de trente ans. (124)

The passage is reminiscent of (and possibly an allusion to) Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust constructs a scene where the aroma and taste of the tea and cakes act as triggers to capturing scenes from the past. However the word choice of *embaumer* suggests another layer of meaning (embalming a cadaver) that lurks just below the surface and penetrates this safe space.

The narrator fabricates her mother’s body language. “Elle s’était nichée dans le fauteuil de cuir comme une poule s’installerait pour couver” (123). In so doing, she finds a protective mother who wants to give life to her chicks. However, the egg (the story) the mother is getting ready to deliver is about trying to destroy her. As the mother gets ready to speak about the daughter’s visit to the doctor (that took place earlier that day), the narrator penetrates another layer by interjecting the daughter’s internal monologue about a memory of a memory. She used to operate on her dolls; in fact, she often eviscerated them. The little girl used the dolls as objects around which to act out her unconscious knowledge about her mother’s attempts to abort her. It resonates with the memory of swallowing and vomiting the seeds, but in this scenario the child is the aggressor who acts upon an object rather than upon her own body. The adult narrator uses the memory about her operations to mediate between what the little girl knew on an unconscious
level and what the adolescent is about to know consciously. The little girl said nice things to the
dolls, knowing that she intended to harm them; the mother does something similar to the
adolescent. She will tell the story in order to protect her child from repeating her mother’s
mistake. The pattern continues. Like alternating layers of sediment, the mother’s spoken
monologue alternates with the daughter’s internal monologue until the location shifts to the street.

The narrator creates conceptual dissonance through juxtaposition of the story with the site
of its telling. The combination overwhelmed her; she could not face them together until now.
“C’était trop me donner d’un seul coup” (151). At that time, the overstimulation in the street
stunned her; the story, itself, is a blow. “Là, dans la rue, en quelques phrases, elle a crevé mes
yeux, elle a percé mes tympans, elle a arraché mon scalp, elle a coupé mes mains, elle a torturé
mon ventre, elle a mutilé mon sexe” (153-54). The assault on her senses in the street reinforces
and reverberates with the injury to her psyche upon hearing the story. It is an attack that travels
across time and space—from fetus in utero--to adolescent who hears--to adult who bleeds--to
adult in a safe womb (the doctor’s office) where she can finally speak.

**A tortured childhood in a tortured country**

The adult narrator increases the impact of juxtaposing the story with the site of its telling
by including references to collective and personal trauma that will occur years later in the same
location. “Le même trottoir sur lequel coulera plus tard le sang de la haine. Le même trottoir sur
lequel, vingt ans après, j’aurai peur de tomber, acculée à la mort par la chose” (151). As Amy
Hubbell notes, this was the location of the Rue d’Isly massacre, on March 26, 1962, the French
military opened fire on many French Algerians (“The Wounds of Algeria” 64). For a discussion of this massacre of European demonstrators in Oran by the French military see also, Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short Hirstory* 99.
the massacre--in Oran--resonates with another event and another telling. Oran is the setting of Albert Camus' novel *La Peste* (1947) which, as Shoshana Felman argues, is an endeavor to assimilate the trauma of World War II (“Camus’ *The Plague* or a Monument to Witnessing” 96). Felman demonstrates ways in which the epidemic that spreads massive death resembles the Holocaust. When the plague begins, the residents of the city do not believe what is happening because “[t]he event (the Plague--, the Holocaust)……has no place in, and therefore cannot be assimilated by or integrated into, any existing cultural frame of reference” (104). Similarly, in *Les Mots pour le dire*, the knowledge that her mother tried to murder her does not fit into the child’s frame of reference; she has great difficulty in finally telling the story.

The intersection of childhood trauma with the Algerian war and its aftermath is not confined to the street. It seeps into supposedly safer domestic spaces too. In one scene, the adolescent narrator is forced to witness a conversation between her divorced parents; the civil war in the family mirrors aspects of the war in Algeria. In the chapter that precedes this event, she refers to the period following France’s military victory, paradoxically, as the demise of French Algeria. “L’Algérie française vivait son agonie. C’était l’époque où, ainsi que disent les spécialistes, la Guerre d’Algérie était militairement gagnée pour les Français” (105). However, during this uneasy peace, the use of torture as well as hostilities persist.85

Pour le ministre de la Guerre à Paris il n’y avait plus de guerre en Algérie. Plus de canons, plus de balles… à envoyer là-bas. Pour le grand livre de compte de l’économie française c’était le calme plat car les baignoires, les électrodes, les paires de claques, les coups de poing dans la gueule, les coups de pieds dans le

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85 Rothberg discusses the relationship between the German occupation of France during World War II and the Algerian War. He notes that in Jean Améry’s essay, “Torture,” in which he writes about the torture to which he was subjected by the Nazis, Améry makes references to torture in Algeria and in Vietnam. See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 193.
ventre et dans les couilles, les cigarettes à éteindre sur les bouts de seins et les queues, ça se trouvait sur place: broutilles. La torture ça n’existait pas. La torture ce n’était qu’une simple question d’imagination, ce n’était pas sérieux….C’était la fin dans l’ignoble avec les ripostes séculaires des Arabes, leurs terribles manière de régler les comptes: les corps éventrés, les sexes coupés, les foetus pendus, les gorges ouvertes…Il me semble que la chose a pris racine en moi d’une façon permanente, quand j’ai compris que nous allions assassiner l’Algérie. Car l’Algérie c’était ma vraie mère. Je la portais en moi comme un enfant porte dans ses veines le sang de ses parents. (105-106)

Torture by electricity, which Cardinal includes in this passage, was considered to be a “clean technique” because it left few marks. The French used the field telephone magneto (the gégène) to generate electricity for torture as well as for communication (Rejali 5, 144-6). In the next chapter, the telephone serves the dual purposes of communication and torture within the family. The mother forces her daughter to witness calls to her ex-husband about insufficient child support; the argument inevitably turns into a dispute about their divorce and their dead child. The subject matter—family finances—recalls the phrases livre de comptes and régler les comptes. In addition, the use of the verb riposter creates a juxtaposition of a verbal response (“Elle ripostait qu’il…” 140) with potentially deadly acts of violence (les ripostes). The call, which is supposed to be about obtaining supplies, is really about exacting revenge. The pain endured during torture causes the person’s world to disintegrate and, at the same time, the disintegration of the world is the cause of the person’s pain (Scarry 41-42). “Ces coups de téléphone étaient une torture!....Au cours de mon adolescence, c’est dans ces moments-là que j’ai commencé à penser au suicide” (140). The French term for telephone call, which contains the word coup, resonates with the
emotional bludgeoning endured by the child. As both worlds—family and Algeria—collapse, her inner world shatters too as psychosis (la chose) and suicidal tendencies take hold.

The adult narrator implicitly relates familial violence to torture in Algeria again when she relates an incident that occurred when she was two or three years old. Her older brother threw her favorite toy, a plush monkey on roller skates (un singe en peluche à roulettes), into the fire. She retaliated by pummeling a boy doll that belonged to him. She is punished but he is not.

Ma mère arrive et me flanque une paire de claques à toute volée. Je me mets à hurler, à trépigner. Ma mère me gifle encore. Cela m’excite davantage, je suis devenue enragée, je veux mordre, déchirer, casser. J’entends ma mère dire à Nany:

--Il faut la mettre sous la douche, il n’y a que ça pour la calmer. (229)

The term, paire de claques, used previously in the passage about torture in Algeria, appears in her description of this scene. Furthermore, the French used torture as “a procedure of ‘pacification’ during ‘the Battle of Algiers’” (Vidal-Naquet cited in Stora 51). The mother justifies her own use of violence—slaps and forced immersion under a cold shower—as a means of calming the child. In both cases, the euphemism belies the reality.  

Torture with water was used in Algeria (Lazreg 114). Forced immersion led to near suffocation or loss of consciousness (Rejali 160). In Cardinal’s text, the bathtub (la baignoire) appears in both the passage about Algerian prisons and in the scene that takes place in the home. The mother and Nany (her nurse) place her in the bathtub, restrain her face and hands and turn on the shower. “Le jet d’eau froide me prend en pleine face, me coupe le souffle…” (229).

Cardinal employs a vocabulary of near suffocation to describe the impact of the water that enters her mouth and nose (229-30).

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86 For a discussion of euphemisms and torture, see Lazreg 112.
The scene begins with recognition of unequal power but retention of agency. Because her brother is bigger and stronger, she compensates by directing her fury upon an object that represents him (the boy doll). Her effective acts of outward aggression involve verbs such as piétiner, écraser, briser, supprimer and tuer. When the mother enters the scene, the narrator employs verbs of resistance involving voice (hurler) and body (trépigner, gigoter, me débattre). However, the child’s efforts are ineffective. “Je ressens mon impuissance à les battre comme une véritable torture” (229). Her situation of complete helplessness mimes the position of the prisoner overwhelmed by the absolute power of the regime.

Compliance is the only way to stop the abuse: “…je n’ai qu’une chose à faire pour stopper l’eau…c’est de m’arrêter et de me calmer” (229-30). The narrator conveys a gradual shift towards a war against herself through the use of reflexive verbs and by adopting the language of the aggressor (me calmer). Then she directs her agency upon herself. “Du fond du moi monte une puissance colossale qui contraint ma rage: la volonté, et un autre pouvoir vient à ma rescousse: la dissimulation. Toutes mes forces sont mobilisées pour saisir ma violence, l’enfermer, l’enterrer le plus loin possible” (230). Verbs of repression underscore the movement inward. Furthermore, the phrase, “ma gorge est serrée comme par un étau” (230) employs components of the language used to describe pain including an as-if structure and metaphors of weapon and wound.87 At the beginning of the scene, which centers upon power and injustice, she tries to destroy the doll; at the end she suppresses herself. Outward calm prevails—silent docility assuaged by tears.

The event that triggered this memory was an uncontrollable shower of tears over a perceived injustice (a parking ticket). In the analyst’s office, the narrator uses cues from her body to reconstruct the scene from early childhood. She considers the reasons behind her tears. “Je

87 For a discussion of the language used to describe pain, see Scarry 15.
sentais qu’il y avait quelque chose d’autre” (225). The phrase, *quelque chose d’autre*, is similar to the phrase used by the doctor in her second visit—“parlez-moi d’autre chose”—when she was talking about the uncontrollable flood of blood. “*Autre chose*” was part of the linguistic bridge that was the doctor’s tool. The narrator uses a similar phrase here to reach towards a very early manifestation of her internal witness. The enforced shower resonates with the uncontrollable flow of blood that plagued her earlier as well as with her tears in the present. By reconstructing this early scene in the presence of the analyst, she locates the divided little girl who must appear to be passive and the split-off inner witness who sees and protects her violence and buried truth.

The recognition of this aspect of the psychic split (outward passivity/concealed violence) that made it possible for her to survive as a child is a critical point in her recovery as an adult. It enables her to use her aggression in constructive ways. She functions competently in the world and she begins to write. Like the women to whom Hélène Cixous refers in “Le Rire de la Méduse,” the narrator conceals her writing; she hides her notebooks under her mattress. Initially she does not believe that she is worthy or capable of writing a book. Among the great authors she mentions (all male) is Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet the title of Cardinal’s text, like Sartre’s autobiographical project, *Les Mots*, emphasizes the power of words. Sartre divides his text into two sections: 1) Lire 2) Ecrire. These mainly solitary activities formed him. “Je suis né d’écriture” (Sartre 127). Writing became his raison d’être. “Écrivant j’existaïs…” (Sartre 126). While the process of writing is certainly critical for the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire*, it is speaking in the presence of the empathic witness that leads to her rebirth. Becoming an author as well as entering into other aspects of a full and rich life stem from her psychoanalytic journey.

The narrator’s progression towards health coincides with the mother’s decline. Chapter XI opens, “Pendant cette dernière année de mon analyse ma mère vivait son agonie” (291). The
narrator reflects upon the slip (*lapsus*) in her draft (*brouillon*) where she wrote, “ma mère vivait son analyse” instead of “ma mère vivait son agonie.” Her interpretation is, “…je pense qu’une analyse bien conduite doit mener à la mort d’une personne et la naissance de cette même personne nantie de sa propre liberté, de sa propre vérité” (291). It also expresses a wish to save her mother. In addition, these two sentences reflect tension between the narrator who conflates mother and daughter—or blurs (*brouiller*) the boundaries between them—and the narrator who revises her text in order to separate them and the paths they take.

This chapter, which presents the mother’s final journey, reverberates with aspects of the daughter’s odyssey. The opening sentence, with its parallel structure to the sentence that begins chapter VI—“L’Algérie française vivait son agonie” (105)—recalls the profound effect of the Algerian war upon the child’s psychosis. Furthermore, it links the mother’s deterioration with her exile from Algeria. Exile brought the collapse of her world—home, property, social position and identity. The daughter’s health was a loss to the mother as well because *la chose* was the link between them and the mother valued it; it shone like a treasure (293).

When the daughter decides to move into her own apartment with her three children, the mother, who cannot afford to remain in the residence they shared, moves in with a couple from Algeria. In their home, which maintains a French-Algerian ambience, she uses her medical training to care for the sick husband. This allows her to resume a former role within a lost and cherished atmosphere. The respite is short lived. The man’s death triggers a belated revisiting of exile. This second wounding is more severe than the first; the psychosis that she was able to suppress until now overwhelms her.

A telephone call from the widow to the daughter brings the news of her mother’s condition; the woman will no longer allow her to remain in the apartment. Earlier in the text, the
mother called the father concerning the daughter’s needs. Now the object of discussion is the mother’s care. The telephone appears repeatedly during the mother’s tortuous journey towards suicide as family members and doctors decide her fate. Finally, a telephone call carries the news of her death. The mother’s self-destruction recalls the child’s thoughts about suicide triggered by telephone conversations about her. The use of the telephone in both parts of the text link mother’s and daughter’s trauma across time and space.

During the first examination, the physician who is also a relative, is alarmed by the mother’s extremely high blood pressure; he intends to hospitalize her. The scene recalls the narrator’s visits to specialists who could not see beyond the physiological symptoms and of her own confinement in an institution. The daughter is the only one who sees her mother’s underlying affliction—*la chose*. During the days that follow, she becomes the mother’s empathic witness—first through her body (“Je ressentis tout ce qu’elle était en train de vivre” 303) and later through language when the mother insists that her daughter be present during an interview with another doctor. The daughter sits in the background as the mother talks to him about her life as a girl and young woman. “Jusqu’à cet instant elle avait été ma mère uniquement ma mère, pas une personne…Pour moi elle n’avait pas de nom c’était : ma mère. Dans ce cabinet de médecin parisien je rencontrais pour la première fois Solange de Talbiac…” (308). The content of the mother’s discourse as well as the daughter’s physical placement alter the mother/daughter dyad. The scene, which offers the daughter a glimpse into a time zone where she may not enter, allows the narrator to place herself more firmly along a chronological continuum that recognizes the unbridgeable gap in experience between generations. She cannot alter her mother’s path but she can write the story.
Recapituation

She traces her finger in the sand at her mother’s grave, repeatedly forming the first letter of her mother’s name. This evokes a memory of childhood excursions to the beach in Algeria. “Vous vous souvenez? Vous m’emmeniez à la chasse au trésor avec vous. Les vagues avaient déposé leur petit butin en lignes de guirlandes festonnées sur le sable humide. Vous disiez que j’avais des yeux de lynx, que je savais trouver mieux que personne les nacres, les porcelaines, les escargots pointus, les oreilles de mer, les couteaux roses….Ensuite vous les perciez, vous les polissiez, vous les vernissiez et avec du fil de laiton et du carton vous les assembliez, vous les colliez et pour finir il sortait de vos mains un merveilleux bouquet” (311-12). This scene recalls the arduous search for the inexistent treasure and reworks it in a healing context. This time the child does not have to scratch in the ground with her fingernails to find pebbles to offer to a withholding, rejecting and murderous mother. The sea (la mer) is a mother who gives freely and bountifully. Like the pebbles, the objects the child finds on the beach represent her. This mother welcomes the objects; she nurtures this embryo, crafts it and enables it to blossom. The bouquet of seashells reworks the painful scene at her sister’s tombstone where the mother lovingly composes a floral arrangement for her dead daughter. In contrast, she shares this bouquet with her living child. The narrator not only constructs a more integrated mother in this scene, she also depicts a woman who, like the writer, transforms through art and like the person in the lapsus of her draft, might have been reborn through a journey.

Le Livre d’Emma

Marie Célie Agnant’s fictional narrative, Le Livre d’Emma (2001) concerns a Haitian woman living in Montreal, who is accused of murdering her baby daughter, Lola. Emma is
incarcerated in a psychiatric unit awaiting diagnosis to be determined by Dr. MacLeod, the white psychiatrist assigned to her case. Like Cardinal’s narrator, Emma has reached an impasse; she is imprisoned not only in space but by the words of experts in power, like MacLeod, who are incapable of understanding her. There is no authentic listener who can hear her voice. When Cardinal’s narrator was treated as an object in the hospital, she compared herself to a vase on the table. Similarly, Flore (the translator) observes that Emma is an object for Dr. MacLeod. Furthermore, instead of referring to her by her name, the hospital staff identifies Emma as the black woman in room #122 (la nouère de 122) (Agnant, Le Livre d’Emma 23). However, Emma cannot escape from this more securely guarded institution. Instead, she revolts by setting the terms for giving testimony. Even though she speaks French fluently, Emma will only speak her mother tongue, Creole. Furthermore, she will not reply to questions, but insists on telling her story in her own way. Her linguistic stance is an assertion of agency as well as hope that the translator they are forced to find is someone who can understand her feelings as well as her words.

In contrast to Dr. MacLeod, Flore, the translator he hires, tries to build a bridge towards Emma by tuning in to her body language. She senses that “l’âme d’Emma se trouve ainsi prisonnière de la folie qui s’est emparée de son corps” (11). The vocabulary of seizing applied to psychosis recalls the use of prendre racines in reference to la chose taking hold inside the woman’s body in Les Mots pour le dire. Flore begins to translate Emma’s unspoken questions. ”Du regard, elle m’interroge: ‘D’où sors-tu, toi? Tu te crois sans doute utile à quelque chose dans la vie?’ semble-t-elle me demander” (11). Flore is filled with self-doubts (12).

88 “Pour le docteur MacLeod, Emma n’était plus un être humain mais un cas, un dossier, peut-être même un objet dans la chambre 122 ” (160).
89 The spelling of nouère reflects pronunciation.
Nevertheless, after several weeks of sessions, she feels compelled to be Emma’s companion on a journey and to be her witness.

Emma’s embodied trauma lies buried just under the surface; “tu ne sais rien, absolument rien de ce qui se cache sous ma peau,” she declares to Dr. MacLeod. Emma’s skin, like Cardinal’s blood, both obscures and reveals meaning. The key to unlocking the door to the past lies in the underlying connotations of the fragmented and seemingly unrelated phrases that Emma utters such as *le bleu, la malédiction du sang* and *la peau à l’envers*. Only Flore comes to comprehend this special vocabulary. *Le bleu* is the intense color of the sea and sky that surrounds Grand Lagon, Emma’s birthplace. It seeps inside people and carries deep despair originating hundreds of years ago in ships that delivered their cargoes of enslaved people with blue-black skin. *La malédiction du sang* is a curse derived from slavery and hatred that passes through blood lines. Like Cardinal’s *le sang maudit*, it can transmit madness from one generation to the next as well as hatred of one’s own flesh. The mothers in these texts transmit transgenerational trauma to their daughters that is linked to collective history (Algeria in *Les Mots pour le dire*; Haiti in *Le Livre d’Emma*). Emma’s trauma is deeply rooted in brutal events that left traces on the mother’s and daughter’s bodies. *La peau à l’envers* is a physical manifestation of *la malédiction du sang*. A light skinned child born to parents with blue-black skin is testimony to

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90 See Noelle Carugi’s discussion of the significance of the color blue in “‘Cet océan opaque de l’identité niée’ Une lecture du Livre d’Emma de Marie-Célie Agnant” in which she argues, « [s]ymboliquement, le bleu représente la pensée inconsciente et les monologues d’Emma dérivent sur les libres-associations nées des profondeurs de cette couleur où le regard se perd à l’infini. » Blue is also associated with enclosure, imprisonment, opacity as well as melancholy and emptiness (104).

91 The cramped, inhumane conditions in the holds of the slaving vessels resonates with conditions in the cattle cars en route to concentration camps. The Nazis used existing train lines; the slaving ships traveled along established trade routes. Upon arrival, those who survived were deprived of former identities. Numbers tattooed on arms replaced names for camp inmates; slaves were branded. Kilima is “baptized” with a new name—Rosa—which she rejects, but which, nevertheless is passed on to her granddaughter. See also Lanzmann’s use of the word, *cargo* applied to humans, in his film, *Shoah*. 
silenced stories of rapes that occurred long ago. Eventually, Emma begins to trust Flore enough to tell her about her traumatized childhood with a psychotic mother who had inside-out skin.

**Emma’s journey**

Fifie and Grazie are light-skinned twins who hate Fifie’s daughter Emma because of her blue-black skin. Twinning serves as a means of underscoring the unintegrated mother’s split off selves. While Fifie withholds language—she does not speak to her child—Tante Grazie spews out corrosive stories. What stories are told to whom and by whom is an essential element in feminist postmemory (Hirsch, “Marked by Memory” 188). The venomous tales Grazie relates traumatize the little girl and shape her. Emma’s adult narrative voice relates the information transmitted to her by Grazie about her origins. Emma was part of a multiple birth—quintuplets. The midwife, who believed that all of them were dead, was about to remove the bodies to the garbage dump or bury them in a hole when Emma emitted a loud cry that saved her life. The women’s response—disappointment that all five were not dead—creates conceptual dissonance in the reader who can only imagine the devastating impact of the story upon the surviving child. Furthermore, the way in which Grazie tells the story propels the event into a borderland that straddles between the unusual and the extreme. Her choice of vocabulary—têtards crevés instead of stillborn babies, gorgone instead of birth canal, vomir instead of give birth, turns babies into disgusting objects and transforms birth into a monstrous nightmare.

Emma’s birth is part of a traumatic timescape. There is no date recorded on a calendar that would place her arrival in chronological time. Instead this multiple birth, itself, becomes a marker of time. People situate events before or after it. Beforehand, the people of Grand Lagon used catastrophes such as hurricanes and tidal waves as time references. Emma includes Flore
among several names of hurricanes, thus slipping the translator into another time and place. At the time of Emma’s birth there was a terrible hurricane. According to Grazie, Emma’s first piercing cries drowned out the howling winds and no one remembers the name of that hurricane. The event disrupts memory and displaces the already extreme markers of time. It is the split that marks the before and after of trauma.

According to Grazie, Emma’s cries split open a piece of furniture:

Il y a, dans la chambre de Fifie, face au lit sur lequel elle gît, inconsciente, dans une mare de liquide noirâtre et gluant, une grande armoire en acajou dépoli, au ventre rebondi comme la panse d’un animal qui s’apprête à crever. Mon cri, la force de mon cri fait craquer le bois qui répand sur le sol une armée de termites affolées. (54-55)

The use of the present tense brings this story and the armoire, a testimonial object, into the present. Grazie uses it as a way of telling little Emma that she destroyed her mother. The armoire, with its protruding belly, resembles a pregnant woman. The termites, like the fetuses, ate away at Fifie’s interior until she cracked physically and psychologically. The text suggests that Fifie suffered from a postpartum depression. Moreover, it is Emma’s cry, which indicates the infant’s needs, that causes the mother’s world (the armoire) to fall apart. Emma’s cries, her longing for her mother, will continue to frighten Fifie and Grazie will sometimes stifle them by gagging her.

The armoire reflects thematic elements that will occur throughout the text. It represents embodied, unarticulated transgenerational trauma passed down through the maternal line. The unfinished and therefore unprotected wood renders the external layer more vulnerable to unexpected blows. Mahogany is a dark wood; the armoire represents, not only Fifie, but her dark-skinned mother, Rosa whose world (her marriage) disintegrated after the birth of her light-
skinned daughters. (Her husband thought that they could not be his offspring). This armoire probably contained clothing, but the term originally meant a closet used to store arms. An army of termites occupies this armoire; these weapons cause self-destruction. Like internalized trauma, they gnaw away from the inside and eventually rupture through uncontrolled acts of violence.

The borderland between the unusual and the extreme, implicit in Grazie’s story, extends to the silent stories expressed via the ways in which bodies are connected during this birth. In addition to the umbilical cord, the thread that links mother and baby, Emma is born with five cauls on her head--hers and those of her four stillborn sisters. A caul is a piece of the amniotic sac that remains attached to the baby at birth and must be cut off. It is a remnant of a porous membrane, an in-between intimate space between mother and gestating fetus. Its presence resonates with Emma’s desperate cries at birth and the yearning that will continue throughout her life for the nurturing mother she never had. It is unusual for a baby to be born with one caul; five cauls borders upon the fantastic. Fifie, Grazie and the neighbors believed that all the cauls were attached to Emma because she sucked the life out of her sisters in utero. However, Emma says that, as a child, she knew that the cauls gave her additional understanding--the ability to comprehend for five people. The child’s interpretation is an early attempt to provide an alternative to the dominant narrative that defines her. Emma’s status as part of a multiple birth and her immediate use of the pronoun nous--“Nous sommes cinq, d’un seul coup cinq enfants, cinq filles mort-nées” (52)--places her with the dead and it foreshadows her future as a student of collective history that includes deep identification with her forebears. When Emma speaks about the history of slavery, she uses the nous form again, thereby placing herself in the past within the holds of slaving ships where “les vivants n’ont seulement que l’apparence de vivants. Je dis bien apparence parce que, sur les bateaux, déjà nous étions morts” (22). The statement recalls Mado’s
testimony about survival after Auschwitz: "Comme moi sans doute. Semblant. Ils vivent en apparence…… Je suis morte à Auschwitz et personne ne le voit" (Delbo, Mesure de nos jours 49, 66). Both her mother’s womb (which contained Emma’s personal prehistory) and the holds of the ships (which contained collective prehistory) are borderlands where life and death are not clearly separated. The imagery resonates with Edouard Glissant’s depiction of the holds of the slaving ships as wombs of death: “Cette barque est ta matrice, un moule, qui t’expulse pourtant. Enceinte d’autant de morts que de vivants en sursis” (La Poétique de la Relation 18). In addition, because of her present position as prisoner, Emma is not fully alive. Like the inhabitants of the holds of the ships, she too is on borrowed time. Emma’s sisters, the four stillborn babies, have no names or tombstones to commemorate them, but Emma is attached to them through body and voice; she cries loudly enough for all of them. Cauls sometimes cover the newborn’s face like a veil. In Emma’s thesis about occluded history—history that is not part of the official narrative—she seeks out the lost and silenced stories of the dead and she speaks for them.

Shunned by family, neighbors and other children, the child finds a sick dog at the garbage dump—a site that recalls Emma’s close call with annihilation as an infant. She nurses the dog back to health and showers the love and care she never received onto it. The dog provides some of what Emma lacks: unconditional love, loyalty and solace (he licks her tears). Although he does not understand language, he listens as the little girl articulates her thoughts and feelings. This is a survival mechanism that allows the child to affirm her own reality by formulating a counter-text to Grazie’s hateful words and Fifie’s annihilating silence. She uses the dog to construct her first internal witness, her internal thou; he functions as the first of three witnesses who help her fight against psychosis and self-destruction.
Emma uses the dog, whom she names Tonnerre, to help establish her identity. Fifie will not tell her who her father is and Grazie makes up stories about a horrible, ghostly being spewed up from the sea: “…comme tout ce qui est mauvais, il [le père] serait venu par la mer, vomi par l’océan au cours d’une journée de furie, et c’est l’enfer qui, n’en pouvant plus de sa présence, l’aurait précipité dans les flots” (69). Agnant’s portrayal of the sea differs from Cardinal’s. Cardinal’s narrators in Les Mots pour le dire, as well as in other texts, love to swim in the waves and past the waves in a sensual, life-affirming and welcoming sea. As indicated in the scene with her mother on the beach in Algeria, the Mediterranean casts off its bounty after a storm. In contrast, the storms that batter Haiti include huge waves that invade the land and fill the houses with water. After the deluge, Emma finds objects associated with death (squelettes de poissons, coquilles vides, ossements) (82). In addition, the sea carries history—collective trauma suffered in the holds of slaving vessels—“… cette eau dans son bleu si bleu, cache des siècles de sang vomi des cales négriers, sang de tous les nègres que l’on jetait par-dessus bord” (112). The illusive, frightening father Grazie depicts comes from these hellish waters. Emma compensates by naming Tonnerre, who loves and protects her—he bares his teeth at Grazie—as her father. She defines herself through language by forging her own birth certificate. Then she slides the pen, a symbol of power, between the dog’s toes, holds his paw and writes, Father: Tonnerre Brisebois, in place of Father: Unknown. This act makes the dog an official witness to Emma’s first written challenge to the dominant version of history—in this case, Grazie’s. The dog’s name alludes to and reconfigures the story about Emma’s birth. Brisebois recalls the mahogany armoire that cracked open when Emma cried out and Tonnerre refers to the thunderous storm. This paternal name establishes a strong figure and symbolically places him at the birth scene where he can
protect the feeble infant from annihilation. Furthermore, the name eliminates the comparison of babies to termites by implicitly replacing rot (pourriture) with power (pouvoir).

Like Cardinal’s narrator, little Emma longs for her mother’s love. She dreams that Fifie covers her with kisses. “Peu à peu, je me transforme. Chrysalide, avec une volupté sans pareille, je m’ouvre sous son regard ébloui. Mes cheveux ruissellent en cascades de boucles lourdes et soyeuses, et ma peau, irisée, adopte cette couleur de miel doré, celle que porte si fièrement Fifie. Je suis un bâton de glace au lait vanillé. Sur mon visage, sur mes bras, Fifie passe sa langue avide, puis elle me serre sur sa poitrine et pleure en jurant qu’elle m’aimera toujours, moi, son unique fille, sa fille chérie” (60-61). Emma revises the story of her birth through a dream where she changes into a child who resembles her mother. The dream alters aspects of the original metamorphosis theme with its disgusting imagery of dying tadpoles vomited out of Fifie’s body. This rebirth involves a different species and a later stage of metamorphosis (a chrysalis is a butterfly pupa). As part of this process, the fully grown caterpillar sheds its skin revealing another harder skin, the chrysalis. The creature that emerges is not an ugly toad; it is a lovely butterfly. The child that appears in the dream has symbolically shed the black skin that her mother thinks is ugly. This is a deliberate act underscored by her use of the reflexive, je me transforme. She changes Fifie too. The dream mother uses the maternal tongue, la langue maternelle, to love her child through body and language.

Although Emma maintains that the dream helped her to survive (60), it is a psychotic coping mechanism. Like Cardinal who symbolically aborts herself through uterine bleeding in order to fulfill her mother’s wish, Emma kills herself off so that her narcissistic mother can gaze with delighted surprise at a child who is almost her own image. Furthermore, Emma receives la langue maternelle at a terrible price. This mother devours her child. (The image is reminiscent of
Sophie’s dream in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* where the mother chases Sophie and tries to squeeze her into the photograph with her.)

When Emma awakens from her dream, she remembers that everyone thinks she is ugly and that her mother does not value her. “Fifie n’a jamais cru à cette thèse qui prétend que les enfants sont la richesse des malheureux” (61). The adult narrator’s use of the word *thèse* in this context, a term that the little girl would not have known, is part of an associative thread that moves between past and present. It links the mother’s rejection of the child who had tried to recreate herself through a dream with the jury’s rejection of the adult’s creation, the dissertation.

**Buried treasure**

Emma’s dream, “elle me serre sur sa poitrine et pleure en jurant qu’elle m’aimera toujours, moi, son unique fille, sa fille chérie” (Agnant, *Le Livre d’Emma* 61) resonates with the child’s fantasy about finding treasure in *Les Mots pour le dire*, “quelle surprise elle aurait! Son visage se détendrait elle m’embrasseraît, elle m’aîmerait” (Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* 86). Both children reconstruct their mothers’ verbal and affective responses by symbolically replacing themselves. Emma becomes a light-skinned child; Cardinal seeks unique pebbles--gems that her mother would value. Emma, too, decides to find a treasure that will win her mother’s love. She does not know what the precious object is; nevertheless she searches all over the island. She will find pieces of her own buried truth. Tonnerre accompanies her and helps her to dig in the ground. They unearth a box of cartridges. The bullets in their coffin-like container represent her suppressed rage. Bringing it to the surface in the presence of a witness, even if he is just a dog, serves a purpose. As she imagines shooting Tante Grazie full of holes, she releases some of her pent-up anger. However, she realizes that, although the box holds ammunition, she
cannot use it because she has no gun. She reburies it even deeper. Like the helpless child forced to stand under the cold shower in Cardinal’s text, Emma suppresses her rage until adulthood when she uses the power of her pen. The child, who is afraid of her unacknowledged murderous rage towards her mother, splits her emotions between Grazie, the mother she hates and Fifie, the mother she loves.

During a subsequent search Emma revisits her buried grief about her mother’s wish to kill her. The dog unearthed the remains of a baby. The child reasons that it was an unwanted child; she wonders out loud whether the mother buried the baby alive and whether its skin color was even bluer than hers. As she directs these and other questions to the dog, an overwhelming sadness wells up within her. The dog’s presence makes it possible for her to address her internal thou—to let herself hear her sorrow, even if no other human being validates it. She cries bitterly, but briefly. “Au bout d’un moment, je rassemble les ossements dans mon mouchoir sale et m’en vais enfouir le tout au pied d’un flamboyant, avec une poignée de pétales rouges” (83). This more proper burial with flowers and a makeshift shroud is an act of personal and shared commemoration that reinserts her into collective history with her sisters and with other unwanted, unnamed infants furtively concealed in unmarked graves. However, the abruptly cut-off tears, the word choice of enfouir (which connotes hiding) rather than enterrer and the quick reburial suggest that the child is not ready to consciously assimilate and mourn the knowledge that her mother wants her to be dead. She still clings to an impossible hope. “Le jour n’est pas loin où je mettrai la main sur le trésor. J’en ai la certitude. Je n’ai qu’à fermer les yeux pour jouir de la vision de Fifie qui m’ouvre les bras pour me serrer sur son coeur lorsque je le lui remets” (83). She still closes her eyes to the truth and continues her journey in search of treasure.
On another day, they go to the cemetery and see a very large rat nursing its baby. The child reacts with sadness and yearning for the nurturing mother she never had. Little Emma’s longing for her mother’s breast reemerges in language when the adult Emma chooses the name, Lola for her daughter. Lola resembles lolo, a term for breast as well as a child’s word for milk. Paradoxically, the rodent becomes a role model; she decides that when she has a baby she will nurse it. This rat has gotten fat by feeding on human corpses unearthed at night by thieves who rob the dead and leave the bodies exposed. The child knows a specific story that her aunt told her. “Elle raconte que la famille Duplan, revenue au cimetière le lendemain de la mort de monsieur Duplan, l’aurait retrouvé assis sur sa tombe, nu comme au jour de sa naissance. On avait emporté le cercueil pour le revendre aux pompes funèbres et ses vêtements auraient été vus dans un de ces grands magasins qui appartiennent aux gros bonnets de la capital” (84). The passage recalls what Rothberg calls a chain of contamination in his analysis of the incident with the teddy bear in Delbo’s *Auschwitz et après* (*Traumatic Realism* 152-53). In contrast to the chain that Rothberg says leads from murder to celebration in Delbo’s text, this chain is not linear; it is circular and repetitive. Stolen items from the grave are recycled within the framework of commercial institutions and include important members of the community.

Emma’s wanderings with Tonnerre yield no treasure, but when she is eleven years old, Fifie takes her to a remote part of the island where she leaves her with Azwélia who she has engaged to cast a spell upon Emma that will make her irresistible to men. In this way, Fifie plans to get rid of her. Azwélia subjects Emma to three days of strange and revolting ceremonies. Abandoned and abused, Emma loses memory. Part of the reason for the memory loss is that there is no one to whom she can articulate, and thus validate, her thoughts and feelings during this traumatic event. Azwélia will not listen and the dog is not there. Like the narrator of *Les Mots*
pour le dire, Emma uses a vocabulary of visceral wounding (ablation, extraction, excision 91) to convey the psychic blow delivered by a mother to a daughter who is at the threshold of adolescence. Although the mothers’ motivations differ—Fifie wants Emma to attract men while the mother in Cardinal’s text wants her daughter to avoid them—their actions cause irreparable harm. Both betrayals engender unbreachable rifts between mother and daughter.

Illusions about her mother’s love shattered, Emma leaves Grand Lagon and goes to live with Mattie, her deceased grandmother’s cousin. Her suitcase ("ma valise éventrée" 107) corresponds to her shattered psyche and emotional burden. The surface of the suitcase, like the psyche’s protective boundary, has sustained a blow from the outside that pierced through it. Emma carries emptiness and the taste of death (107). The suitcase, which resonates with the evolution of her odyssey, recalls the chrysalis in her childhood dream that enclosed her metamorphosing body. The pupa remains attached to a stationary plant like Emma-as-embryo who clung to the wall of her mother’s uterus. In contrast, the suitcase is associated with travel; it reflects Emma’s movement away from her mother and her childhood home. Furthermore, her path repeats the journey her grandmother took (from Grand Lagon to her cousin Mattie’s home) when she was emotionally shattered. Emma, who shadows her grandmother’s footsteps, seeks her story. “J’étais venue à Mattie avec une seule idée dans la tête: tout connaître sur la vie de ma grand-mère, retrouver les fils que Fifie refusait de me tendre pour m’aider à poursuivre mon chemin” (107). Emma no longer dreams about changing her body. Now her quest is for a body of knowledge about her prehistory.

Mattie listens to Emma, nurtures and mentors her. Like Louise in Un Secret and like Grandma Ifè in Breath, Eyes, Memory, Mattie makes a transgenerational bequest by passing on the thread of history (le fil d’histoire). During this process, Emma takes a journey towards
knowing that is now anchored in language. First Mattie imparts the background about immediate family history starting with maternal grandparents. This sheds light upon the reasons why Fifie cannot love her daughter. Then she continues through the matrilineal line way back across time and space to Africa, to the holds of slaving ships, the auction block and plantations. In contrast to the circular chain formed in Grazie’s story about M. Duplan in the cemetery, Mattie’s stories are linear and placed along a chronological continuum. A healing bond forms with this integrated maternal figure. Mattie is literally a holding presence; the child sits on her knees while Mattie braids her hair and shares her knowledge. “Cette séance de coiffure est un rituel qui précède la nuit. C’est également mon heure de leçons avec Mattie. Je répète sans relâche: la première s’appelait Kilima, elle avait été arrachée à sa mère Malayika, puis vendue aux négriers. Sur l’île, elle donna naissance à Emma, puis Emma à Rosa; puis vint Fifie et encore Emma. Et dans mes veines court le même sang” (131). In contrast to the message of annihilating rejection delivered via Grazie’s words and Fifie’s body language, body and language work together as the repetitive motions of weaving braids and recurrent recitation of ancestors enter Emma into the chain of history. In addition there is more of a sense of self in relation to the present (mon heure) as daily time becomes regulated through soothing ritual and storytelling.

Mattie’s reparative influence yields positive results. Emma thrives as a student and has hopes for the future. Yet the pull towards repeating her early traumatic history lurks just under the surface. At the age of thirteen she continues to have a dream that began when she was four years old during which she runs through a field and cries out so loudly that her voice unearths trees. The earth (her mother’s arms?) opens up and swallows her, but it does not drown out her voice. Emma’s dream bears some resemblance to Sophie’s nightmare of fleeing through a field and being pulled into the photograph of her mother. However, unlike Sophie who is terrified,
Emma welcomes her faithful dream (her rêve fidèle). Indeed, Emma vacillates between what Toni Morrison calls *rememory* and what Marianne Hirsch calls *postmemory*. Mattie encourages Emma to use the transgenerational bequest of *le fil d’histoire* as well as her education to know but not to be engulfed by history; she wants Emma to leave the island and forge a life where she does not repeat the past. Her advice recalls the spirit of Baby Suggs, Denver’s deceased grandmother in *Beloved*, who tells her granddaughter to leave the yard. Denver must walk away from the haunted house where she was raised and where her mother, Sethe, remains with the ghost of her dead child and venture out into the world.

When Emma leaves Mattie to study in France, the childhood search for treasure evolves into the adult’s study of the history of slavery. In her dissertation, Emma challenges the dominant narrative of mainstream history. She seeks to give voice to obscured history; in particular she focuses upon a legendary tribe of strong African women, the Amazons. This choice reflects a yearning to find the place and time before the traumatic break—personal (before the fractured mother who could not protect her baby) and collective (before capture and enslavement). Emma’s project, which involves reworking and mediating memory through research and writing, falls within the realm of postmemory. However, the committee decides that she has not proved her point and rejects her dissertation. For Emma, this is the second wounding, her failed childhood hypothesis, the treasure she could not find and her annihilated voice. There is no empathic witness who can validate her pain and help her to work through it. Not even Nikolas, her lover, can truly hear her.

Emma moves from France to Montreal with Nikolas where she begins to rewrite her dissertation which she keeps in a suitcase. While the first suitcase was part of her need to know, the second suitcase corresponds to her need to be heard. Furthermore, it is one of the objects
associated with embodied trans-generational trauma. Fifie was generally silent; she spoke neither about her own life story nor about collective history. The trans-generational trauma embedded in her armoire (termites) ate away at the interior of the body until it erupted chaotically and wordlessly through the exterior surface. Like her mother’s armoire, Emma’s first suitcase (which she carried before she received \textit{le fil d’histoire} from Mattie) was also split open (éventrée). However, the second suitcase contains a body of knowledge that is in the process of being consciously reorganized and articulated as written text. Emma becomes pregnant; the baby growing in her uterus corresponds to the re-gestating thesis that she keeps in the womb-like suitcase. When Lola is a baby, Emma delivers her rewritten dissertation. After the jury rejects (aborts) it again, Emma kills Lola, her other baby. Through this psychotic act, Emma who believes that Lola was doomed, enters into another time zone where she repeats the actions of women, like Sethe in Morrison’s \textit{Beloved}, who killed their babies in order to spare them from slavery. Furthermore, because Emma identifies with her ancestor, Kilima, who tried to kill her baby (named Emma), she also symbolically kills herself. Like Cardinal’s narrator, who belatedly acts out her mother’s attempts to abort her, Emma fulfills Fifie’s wish. Nevertheless, Emma’s life force is still strong. The social worker who visited her after her arrest remarks that she keeps the suitcase (\textit{une petite valise de cuir fripée}) with her and continues the process of rewriting. As Emma works, she repeatedly uses the idiom \textit{n’avoir pas sa peau} to assert that she will not be destroyed (14). Although her comportment is crumpled like the suitcase (\textit{le visage défait} 14), Emma retains a protective skin—a boundary around her body and her story; she still has something to say. After she transmits \textit{le fil d’histoire} to Flore, Emma ends her journey with suicide but liberates her text through her heir and witness.
Flore’s journey

*Le fil d’histoire* is a central metaphor in Flore’s journey as well as in Emma’s. Before she meets Emma, Flore functions as a thread between the doctor and his patients. She is a conductor, not an empathic witness. As languages pass through her, she translates words but they do not penetrate or wound her. Nor does Flore speak with her own voice; rather she is a neutral, almost invisible medium. In her role as translator as well as in her personal life, Flore occupies an ambiguous space that is in between cultures and languages. Emma recognizes Flore’s uncertain identity by calling her Poupette and by drawing an analogy between her light skin (peau à l’envers) and the inside-out history written by the people who control her thereby setting up a parallel between skin color that veils origins and written language that obscures history.

Unlike Emma, Flore has little knowledge of her family and collective history. Yet there are elements woven into the text that echo Emma’s background. Although Flore and her sister, Gilliane, are not twins, their mixed race appearance as well as their initials recall Emma’s mother, Fifie, and aunt Grazie. Flore’s sensory perceptions resonate with Emma’s situation particularly around themes of enclosure and imprisonment. Before their first meeting Flore has not yet heard Emma’s cries about the intense blue color of the sea and sky that surround Grand Lagon with its associations to madness, despair and slaving vessels. Yet the sight of the sea-green walls inside the hospital throws her off balance. “Ce vert trop terne me fait tourner la tête, comme sous l’effet d’un sédatif” (10). The dulled color, like the diminished intensity of postmemory, affects Flore through her body. Emma’s room, located in a psychiatric wing, is an island within an island like Grand Lagon. Both are islands of madness and despair enclosed by the color of the sea. The atmosphere of Emma’s personal and collective trauma seeps belatedly into a space that she shares with Flore. The sound of Emma’s voice, an untranslatable cry, penetrates Flore: “…la
voix d’Emma qui tranche déjà vif dans ma chair…” (12). The use of the verb *trancher* conveys the abrupt way in which trauma pierces through protective boundaries. Flore receives Emma’s wound through her body. After she leaves Emma’s room, Emma’s voice remains in Flore’s head where it buzzes like a trapped insect. Then she walks through the streets and feels as though she is pursuing a shadow. Her perceptions in the present are altered by ungraspable shadows of memory from another’s past.

When Flore allows herself to be touched by Emma’s pain she gradually evolves from neutral translator to empathic witness. “Au cours de cette quatrième séance, j’ai l’impression que mon esprit quitte la chambre et s’en va voguer sur le fleuve en compagnie d’Emma” (18). The sentence recalls Laub’s statement, “you are not alone any longer—that someone can be there as your companion…” (Laub, “Truth and Testimony” 74). Yet Flore not only becomes a companion to Emma during Emma’s wanderings. Now she questions her identity, her position in the world. This is Flore’s odyssey too.

The transition from translator to witness as well as the evolution into a woman with her own voice involves objects related to writing. During Flore’s first session with Emma, she is sensitive to the sounds of Dr. MacLeod’s pen as he writes in his notebook: “le va-et-vient de la plume sur le papier produit un bruit étrange, semblable au grésillement d’un insecte pris au piège. Et il me vient tout à coup l’idée que l’âme d’Emma se trouve ainsi prisonnière de la folie qui s’est emparée de son corps” (11). The image of madness seizing and imprisoning mind and body recalls the passage in *Les Mots pour le dire* where *la chose* plants its roots inside the narrator. This occurs just after she visits a doctor who misdiagnoses her illness and schedules a hysterectomy. In both cases the doctors, who are incapable of understanding their patients, wield the power of the pen or the knife. The juxtaposition of the scribbling sounds of Dr. MacLeod’s
pen with Flore’s insight indicates that she is beginning to question this locus of power. Cardinal’s narrator says that words can imprison and words can liberate. In *Le Livre d’Emma*, objects that define and confine with words underscore the theme of imprisonment. The social worker’s file on Emma includes newspaper clippings that suggest that Emma murdered her child in a voodoo ceremony. Dr. MacLeod’s briefcase contains papers about Emma. His secretary places a labeled file on Emma within an envelope and hands it to Flore. The choice of the word *bourdonnement* to describe the sound of her typewriter recalls the image of a trapped insect associated with Emma’s voice.

Flore flees from the disturbing sound of the typewriter. Her response reflects a conflict between knowing and not knowing. Although she escapes from the typewriter, the sound of Emma’s voice dominates her mind and body during the weekend and propels her towards writing.

Dans un gros cahier, je me mets à écrire Emma, je réécris plusieurs fois les mêmes choses, mais cela non plus n’a pas d’importance. À la manière des coquillages qui s’emparent des bruits de la mer et reprennent avec entêtement son obsédante musique, la voix d’Emma s’est incrustée en moi, elle a pris possession de moi, comme la mousse s’empare de la rocaille et des troncs des arbres. En écrivant, je m’adresse à Emma: “J’écris, pour dire tout ce qui brûle dans mon corps et dans mon sang, et que je ne parviens pas à t’exprimer lors des séances avec le docteur MacLeod, pour que vive à jamais ta voix, toi que personne n’a jamais écoutée. J’écrirai jusqu’à ta dernière goutte de haine, et ta voix, tel un grelot, résonnera jusqu’à la fin des temps.” (34-35)

The resolution of this conflict—Flore accepts that she must know—evolves through writing. The imagery in this passage reflects the reverberation of trans-generational trauma. Like the seashell
which can only echo the sounds of the sea (la mer), a homonym for mother (la mère), Flore, the symbolic daughter, feels compelled to repeat the mother’s story. However, although Flore has internalized aspects of Emma’s experience, it has not entirely overshadowed her own. She not only writes about Emma, she writes to Emma about what she feels in her own body. It is Flore’s body, Flore’s text. The use of the notebook helps her to cast off her neutrality and her invisibility; she is no longer simply a thread between others, but a woman who is acquiring her own voice.

Flore alters the way in which she performs her job. Instead of translating from Creole to French as Emma speaks and Dr. MacLeod writes in his notebook, Flore begins to use a tape recorder (48). The tape recorder liberates Emma’s voice by bringing it outside of the hospital and into Flore’s personal space where it facilitates a shift from robotic translating to thoughtful and empowering mediation. As Flore listens to the tapes, translates them and transcribes her notes, she makes decisions that protect Emma. For example, she evades incriminating words (64) and she delivers the transcripts to the doctor several days later. While this process strengthens Flore’s ties to Emma’s story, it undermines Dr. MacLeod’s power by distancing him—and his notebook—from direct access to raw testimony. Emma’s voice traveling from the hospital to Flore’s home and Flore’s responses in her notebook recall the voices of separated mothers and daughters on the cassettes that traveled to and from Haiti in Breath, Eyes, Memory. Furthermore, the tape recorder allows an older means of transmission to reemerge in another time and place. Like Grandma Ifè and Tante Atie, generations of women used the oral tradition to pass on history. Flore, who has been cut off from her collective past, seizes upon a tool that helps her to enter into it. As Emma listened to Mattie’s stories and recited her lessons (the list of maternal ancestors), Flore listens to Emma and transcribes her words. Flore’s habit of repeatedly re-reading her copies of the transcripts as well as the schoolbag (cartable) in which she keeps them,
underscore her position as Emma’s student. Furthermore, there is no mention of visible damage to the schoolbag. Unlike Emma’s suitcases, which reflect her psychological states at different points in her journey (the first suitcase is eviscerated—éventrée; the second is crumpled—fripée), Flore’s schoolbag holds the mediated text about Emma’s trauma, but it does not bear her wounds.

During their final sessions, as Emma passes on her ancestors’ stories, the precious fil d’histoire that she received from Mattie, she includes Flore within the matrilineal chain of transmission through terms such as nos grands-mères (106) as well as frequent use of other forms of the third person plural. Flore uses Emma’s trans-generational bequest to weave herself into the fabric of history and live more fully in the present. “Je voulais lui dire que je lui devais une seconde vie, malgré la tourmente qu’elle avait semée en moi, mais je ne parvenais pas à choisir les mots” (106). Her words, reminiscent of Cardinal’s dedication to her analyst, “au docteur qui m’a aidée à naître,” is life-affirming. Unlike Emma, whose metamorphoses always included a taste of death, Flore is able to use yet not be overwhelmed by the wounds of history. It is Flore, the symbolic daughter, who can work through what Danticat calls the “nightmares passed down like heirlooms.” During her journey, Flore finds her voice and through her text, she commemorates the mother’s story.

A Broken Link---

Flore entered into the chain as Emma’s symbolic daughter. However, the establishment of this new link also allowed Emma to repair an older connection. Emma received le fil d’histoire not from her mother, who would not talk to her, but from her grandmother Rosa’s cousin, Mattie. When Mattie imparted Rosa’s story she included information about Fifie and Grazie mainly as part of Rosa’s downfall. Rosa had a fulfilling relationship with her husband,
Baptiste. The birth of light-skinned twins to parents with black skin ruptured their marriage and their psyches. Baptiste believed that he was not the father. Rosa knew that she had not been unfaithful, but they could not talk about this event. Like Halle, who witnessed his wife, Sethe, being abused and shamed in Beloved, Baptiste left and became a disoriented wanderer. Rosa did not know the lost story that emerged through her body. “Laquelle de ses aïeules, se demandait-elle, avait été saillie par quelque démon blanc en chaleur, et dans quel enfer, celui de la canne, du coton ou du café? Pourquoi son ventre vomissait-il cette insulte tant d’années plus tard? Une double insulte, puisqu’elles étaient deux?” (121). The memory of the rape(s) was not part of the family history that was orally transmitted. However, the body held trauma that emerged belatedly. La peau à l’envers, resulting from what Emma called la malédiction du sang, was visible evidence of occluded history concealed within recessive genes. The wound left its trace on the girls’ skin, but not the story.

Mattie’s version of the story conveyed Rosa’s pain, but it did not include the impact of trans-generational trauma upon Fifie and Grazie. Their voices were not heard. They did not speak about a father who never acknowledged them and never spoke to them--as Fifie did not speak to Emma--or about a mother who fell apart because they were born. Rosa could not see past their light skin--as Fifie could not see past Emma’s black skin. Her daughters were a double insult, not individuals as reflected, perhaps, in the sound of Fifie’s name (fille-fille). After Kilima, the first enslaved ancestor brought over from Africa, there was a pattern of alternating names (Emma-Rosa) until the birth of the twins: Kilima—Emma—Rosa—Emma—Rosa—Fifie and Grazie—Emma (127). Rosa did not inscribe her daughters within this pattern. This rupture echoes the characteristic schism created by traumatic events. Strands of DNA in the body
encoded shameful secrets that destabilized the dominant family narrative forming links to stories that were too painful to know.

Rosa referred to Fifie’s and Grazie’s light skin as an empty envelope (“cette peau, enveloppe sans âme”). “Fifie et Grazie ne savaient point comment vivre à l’intérieur de cette peau placée à l’envers. Elles n’étaient rivées à aucune perche, elles flottaient, n’étaient arrimées à aucun quai” (122). The metaphor evoked the pregnancy motif. Fifie’s empty envelope—and empty arms—could not take in her child. Flore’s initial lack of connection to collective history resonated with Fifie’s extreme alienation. However, Flore was capable of welcoming her heritage. By helping Flore to find her moorings, Emma symbolically integrated her fragmented mother. She reinstated her into the chain through Flore, the embodiment of la langue maternelle, who heard Emma’s testimony and embraced her treasure.

The mediated story allows the reader to approach the traumatic rupture.
Epilogue

Face à l’absolu du pouvoir, les mots peuvent seulement vous rester dans la gorge, y être tenus en réserve pour y être préservés. Et pourtant il faut parler, sous peine de suffoquer, d’étouffer…

Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées*

The literary works under discussion here record different kinds of journeys. Whatever the differences among them, and whichever genre—novel or memoir—they all narrate ruptures that echo across time. The authors of these texts represent horrific events from childhood that reverberate in adulthood taking the form of bodily symptoms, nightmares or repetitive behavior. Each individual history belongs to the wider collective/historical trauma that haunts and shapes subsequent generations. But the journey backward, revisiting the past, can also become a liberating one, a return that allows the adult to move forward. During their odysseys, the travelers struggle to reach toward and perhaps almost touch that which was experienced, yet not experienced and to understand that which was known, yet not known.

Saul Friedländer’s *Quand vient le souvenir* and Sarah Kofman’s *Rue Ordener/rue Labat* emerge from the experiences of children hidden during the war—two members of the 1.5 generation. The authors of these texts were hidden children in France during the Holocaust. There are contrasts in their experiences before, during and after the war. Born in France to orthodox Jewish immigrants from Poland, Kofman was one of six children—all of whom survived. Her father was deported and murdered at Auschwitz. Friedländer, an only child, was born into a secular Jewish family in Prague; he immigrated to France with his parents after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Kofman and her mother, who also survived the Occupation, were
hidden together in the apartment of a Christian woman in Paris. Friedländer, whose parents were deported and killed at Auschwitz, was converted to Catholicism and hidden in plain sight under a new identity. Several years after the war Friedländer immigrated to Israel; Kofman remained in France. Despite these differences, both narrators relate feelings of bewilderment and divided identities, characteristic of members of the 1.5 generation.

The representation of these painful experiences often juxtaposes the extreme and the everyday as well as (and often in conjunction with) the use of photographs, objects and intertextuality. They are critical elements in retrospectively representing aspects of childhood trauma in these two autobiographical works written by members of the 1.5 generation. Everyday objects belonging to the lost parents (i.e. a watch, a pen) mark profound loss through inconceivable events (murder at Auschwitz) and underscore the structure of each text. The split in identity and conflicting loyalties find expression in Kofman’s use of objects such as post cards, pictures of conjoined twins and works of art. The trajectory of the protagonist in a treasured book that belonged to his father echoes Friedländer’s deliberate suppression of memory, identity conflict and subsequent quest for synthesis. Finally, a parent’s smile (Friedländer’s mother; Kofman’s father) in an ordinary photograph from a time before catastrophe is a punctum that carries a double wound, backshadowing personal and collective devastation.

Philippe Grimbert’s *Un Secret* and Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* are suffused with the presence of absence in which the first person narrators, children of Holocaust survivors, who experience feelings of belatedness characteristic of the second generation, try to unravel secrets about people who perished during the Holocaust. An impossible mourning (*un deuil impossible*) pervades the family home in Grimbert’s autobiographical novel, *Un Secret*. The little boy does not know the reasons for his parents’ sadness, but it weighs upon him. When the child finds a
stuffed animal (*un chien de peluche*) buried in a trunk in the family’s storage room, he invents an invisible older brother. Eventually, a family friend reveals a secret to him: the previous owner of the *chien de peluche* was his half-brother, Simon, who was murdered at Auschwitz. While searching through archived newspapers from the Occupation, Modiano finds a missing persons notice posted in 1941 seeking a fifteen-year-old girl named Dora Bruder. Belatedly (decades later) he responds by looking for traces of Dora and her story. Objects such as the *chien de peluche* and the missing persons notice represent trauma from the narrators’ prehistory, holding the presence of absence and triggering these quests. Subsequently, photographs of Simon and Dora enable the narrators to reach additional layers of trauma, propelling their journeys towards mourning and commemoration.

Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Annie Ernaux’s *L’Autre fille* pair texts with substantial differences in genre, style, setting and situation, but Danticat’s novel and Ernaux’s memoir *L’Autre fille* both focus on central themes of shame and secrecy. In the opening pages of each book, descriptions of photographs represent the child’s state of sensing, but not consciously knowing, trauma that occurred before her birth. Photographs are integral to the representation of childhood trauma, evolving around shame, secrecy and related issues and they correspond to stages of the narrators’ journeys. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* this includes a frame motif, stemming from the framed photograph. These daughters confront, revisit, and work through family trauma that shapes them in childhood and persists into adulthood.

In “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” Dori Laub says, “[o]ne has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (63). Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire* and Marie-Célie Agnant’s *Le Livre d’Emma* explore the theme of hidden truth. Locating embodied trauma, expressing it to an empathic witness and placing it in writing
(Cardinal’s words, Emma’s book) is the difficult and liberating trajectory of these first person narratives. Objects as well as key words represent the trauma and propel the journeys. For example, each child searches for an elusive treasure, an object that would gain the love of her rejecting, psychotic mother; instead each daughter finds her own buried, painful truth. Certain words embedded in these texts represent trauma for these narrators, providing links to embodied—and silenced—stories, finally voiced and heard.

In all of these works, individual trauma connects with collective and historical trauma. Personal journeys in *Un Secret*, *Dora Bruder*, *Quand vient le souvenir* and *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* are inextricably tied with the Holocaust and its aftermath. In 1940 Annie Ernaux is born into a world at war; explicit and implicit references to World War II are part of the fabric of *L’Autre fille*. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s personal pain originates with abuse at home, but as Donnette Francis has shown, sexual abuse of women is embedded in Haiti’s political history.92 Marie Cardinal’s personal psycho-analytic journey also relates to a larger historical and social context (colonialism, the Algerian War and the feminist movement). The main character in *Le Livre d’Emma*, revisits childhood abuse that occurred in her home but is also tied to the aftermath of slavery and colonialism.

When I began this project, I expected to find that articulating the story in narrative form would lead to some measure of healing. Instead, I found that embodied trauma reverberates in intricate ways through a life and through a text. While healing is not always an outcome, these odysseys, which take different paths, all reach and convey deepened levels of knowing. Writing this dissertation has been a rich journey for me. I have learned a great deal about the complexities involved in representing layers of trauma including the role of objects and photographs, intertextuality, connections between individual/familial trauma and

92 See Francis, “Silences Too Horrific to Disturb.”
collective/historical trauma as well as the interplay of different theoretical lenses. I hope that “The Journey Back: Revisiting Childhood Trauma” may add to the conversation about ways of reading trauma and of interpreting the craft of writers who eloquently express the near-inexpressible.
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