

**SHOOTING THE CANON: FEMININE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
VOICES OF THE FRENCH-SPEAKING WORLD**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

For Sara Steinert Borella.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	7
INTRODUCTION: SHOOTING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CANON.....	9
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>WRITING THE BOURGEOISIE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND ELISABETH LACOIN.....</b>	
Beauvoir's Autobiographies.....	33
Reading Beauvoir.....	41
Beauvoir and Intertextuality.....	43
Zaza's Private Space: <i>Correspondance et carnets d'Elisabeth Lacoïn</i> .....	45
Daughters of the Bourgeoisie.....	50
Zaza Travels To Berlin.....	54
Broken Engagement: Zaza and Merleau-Ponty.....	56
Zaza's Death.....	58
Autobiographical Deaths and (Re)birth(s): <i>Quand prime le spirituel</i> .....	59
<i>Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter</i> .....	65
"J'avais payé ma liberté de sa mort".....	72
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>FRAMING THE FRAGMENTED SELF AND OTHER(S): MARYSE CONDÉ'S LE COEUR A RIRE ET A PLEURER AND HEREMAKHONON.....</b>	
"Je ne suis pas née Antillaise, je le suis devenue".....	78
The Artificiality of Guadeloupe.....	81
French Caribbean Creole.....	83
Francophone Caribbean Literary Traditions.....	85
Maryse Condé as Nomadic Intellectual.....	89
<i>Le coeur à rire et à pleurer</i> .....	93
Maryse Condé Writes the Bourgeoisie.....	96
Space, Language, and Contact With the Other.....	99
Death and Rebirth.....	106
<i>Heremakhonon. Wait For Happiness</i> .....	107
<i>Heremakhonon</i> as Autobiographical Fiction.....	110
A Bourgeois "Marilisse".....	113
Véronica's Sterility: Can the Subaltern Speak?.....	115
Sweeping Away the Colonial Past.....	120
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
<b>WRITING, SPACE, AND VISUAL IMAGERY IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL QUARTET.....</b>	
Theorizing Arab Women's Autobiographies.....	123
Assia Djebbar and Autobiography: An Archaeology of the Self.....	130

## TABLE OF CONTENTS - *Continued*

Language, Autobiography, and "le lent scalpel de l'autopsie à vif".....	136
Writing as Erasure and Rediscovery.....	139
Letters: Writing on Paper in <i>L'amour, la fantasia</i> .....	141
Naming Algeria: Writing on Stone in <i>Vaste est la prison</i> .....	147
Stripped of Words.....	149
The Sultana and Her Shadow: Isma and Hajila.....	150
Within and Beyond the Veil.....	153
The Hammam.....	154
The Harem.....	156
The French Night.....	158
The Tree With No Words.....	159
The Colonial School.....	160
Cultural Swing.....	162
Algerian Society and The Gaze.....	163
The Filming of <i>La nouba</i> in <i>Vaste est la prison</i> .....	166
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
<b>SHOOTING THE CANON: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES FROM</b>	
<b>PAGE TO SCREEN.....</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Women Filming The French-Speaking World.....</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Shooting <i>La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua</i>.....</b>	<b>170</b>
<b><i>Vaste est la prison</i> As Film Journal.....</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>Lila: Djebar's Cinematic Avatar.....</b>	<b>178</b>
<b>"Fate Made You a Prisoner".....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Independence, the Postcolonial Era, and <i>La nouba</i>.....</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>The Women of Mount Chenoua.....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>Benguigui As Cine-(auto)biographer.....</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>Immigrant Memories and Memoirs.....</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>The Fathers.....</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>The Mothers.....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Second-Generation Immigrants, Literature, and Film.....</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>The Children: We Are Not <i>Racaille</i>.....</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Interview 1: Mounsi.....</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>Interview 2: Ahmed Djamai.....</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Interview 3: Soraya Guezlane.....</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>Interview 4: Rachid Kaci.....</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Interview 5: Warda Hissar Houli.....</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Analysis of Interviews: Can The Subaltern Speak Through Films?.....</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>Primary Sources.....</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>Secondary Sources.....</b>	<b>205</b>

## ABSTRACT

In the field of literary production, women's autobiographical writing has been one of the most powerful means of artistic expression. Life-writing is a genre of ambiguity and paradox intertwined with some of the most fundamental questions of literary studies. Within the domain of *lettres françaises*, new canons of female-authored literary works from France and the various regions of the non-Western French-speaking world have emerged during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. This body of published autobiographical texts has worked to re-define the very nature of twentieth and twenty-first century literary canons. In addition to the traditional autobiographical novel, other literary genres such as travel journals, diaries, poetry, confessions, memoirs, and autobiographical fiction provide authors with a wide array of literary alternatives to the classical autobiography.

Focused on the autobiographical texts and films of five French-speaking women of the twentieth century, this study examines both canonical and marginal female authors from France, Northern Africa, and the Caribbean. In addition to dealing with issues such as personal freedom, language, social class, the desire to write, family, alterity, and space, this project seeks to analyze how five French-speaking women autobiographers of different generations and social and national origins established a literature of their own through a *métissage* of autobiographical forms. Since autobiography is a mode that historically has been defined by mostly white, Christian, European men of the upper social echelon, I propose to show the different ways in which the women of this study have in fact been “shooting the autobiographical canon” by taking over, taking aim at, or

altering the established domain of male-authored life-narratives as in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn and Maryse Condé, or in filming a new canon of autobiographical expression in the case of Assia Djebar's and Yamina Benguigui's documentaries.

**INTRODUCTION:  
SHOOTING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CANON**

"Give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, and let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days."

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Hélène Cixous emphasized that "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies--for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal" (875). Two centuries earlier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Confessions* (1769/1782) are often credited with inaugurating the genre of autobiography, did not need any encouragement when he claimed: "Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi" (21). Rousseau's ambitious project became one of the "Great Books" of the Western world, a part of the French literary canon, and one of the first "real" autobiographies.

As Toril Moi has stated in her book entitled *Sexual / Textual Politics* (1985) "The category of 'greatness' has always been an extremely contentious one for feminists, given that the criteria for 'greatness' militate heavily against the inclusion of women in the literary canon" (55). Many would also still agree with Elaine Showalter's remark that "feminine, feminist, or female, the woman's novel has always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces that relegated women's experience to the second rank" (36). My comparative, interdisciplinary project does not, however, focus on the socio-political

and cultural forces that may have led to this gendered discrimination. Rather, it seeks to analyze *how* five French-speaking women autobiographers of different generations and social and national origins, established a “literature of their own”<sup>1</sup> through a mode that historically has been defined by mostly white, Christian, European men of the upper social echelon. To add a homophonic pun to Toril Moi’s combative metaphor, I propose to show the different ways in which they have in fact been “shooting the autobiographical canon” by taking over, taking aim at, or altering the established domain of male-authored life-narratives as in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn and Maryse Condé, or in *filming* a new canon of autobiographical expression in the case of Assia Djebar’s and Yamina Benguigui’s documentaries.

My interest in autobiography has its own autobiographical origins that are closely related to the texts and issues in this study. In 1995, in a course on "Resistance in Twentieth-Century French Literature" taught by Sara Steinert Borella, I read Simone de Beauvoir’s *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* for the first time, but certainly not the last. In August of that same year, when I arrived in Paris in front of *La Maison des Etudiantes*, a dormitory-style residence for young women attending the city's various universities, I quickly realized that it was just a few yards away from the apartment above the famous Rotonde Café where Simone de Beauvoir was born, close to the cafés where she and Jean-Paul Sartre wrote many of their books and autobiographies, and also near the grave that she now shares with him in the Montparnasse cemetery. After one year at the Sorbonne, where Beauvoir and her friend Elisabeth Lacoïn enrolled at the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase was first used by Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own*. It was inspired by Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I came back to Pacific University to write a senior thesis on Beauvoir's autobiography.

In the period between 1999 and 2001, during which time I spent two years as a *lectrice* at the *Université Lumière Lyon II*, I asked my first-year students in English for short presentations based on a topic of their choice. I had no idea how much this seemingly benign task would impact my own research and career. As the weeks passed, my "French" students talked about hobbies, sports, music, their favorite vacation spot--the usual topics. However, the students born in, or with significant ties to the former French colonies, chose to talk about their families, their countries, and the struggles of parents who had immigrated to France in the 1970s. A few months later, in a survey that I constructed based on these *exposés*, they talked about when and why they came to France, the differences between the French school system and the system in their country, and a variety of cultural, political, and linguistic issues that would become an integral part of my current project on autobiography.

From a personal yet scholarly perspective, I became fascinated by life-writing as a form that incites some of the most fundamental and vexing questions in literary studies: What is an "author"? What is the relationship between an author's life experiences and the text that he or she produces? What is the connection between history, memory, and literature? To what extent do issues of gender, race, and social class shape written discourse? What motivates a writer to undertake an autobiographical project? Does a healing of the autobiographical self take place when traumatic and painful events are recorded and shared with a public of readers? These are some of the most essential and

compelling questions posed by literature and by life-writing in particular. As Nicholas Paige noted in his book entitled *Being Interior*,

Autobiography has become a mode of scholarship in itself, a way of proceeding at a time in which critical interest in identity has made it vital to know who is speaking, from what position, and based on what personal experience; especially in matters of race, class, and gender, the autobiographical voice speaks today with unrivaled authority (5).

Until fairly recently, critics of autobiography have been mostly men canonizing the autobiographical works of other "Great Men." The word "canon" comes from Ancient Greek (Kanón) which signifies "rule" or "model." Canon can also be traced to Arabic "qanoon" which means "law" and "mandate." In English<sup>2</sup> and in French, the word "canon" was first used to refer to the approved religious writings of the Catholic Church, or the books selected to be included in *The Bible*. Later, the word canon was used in law and in literary studies to refer to approved reading lists.<sup>3</sup> *The Western canon* is a term that designates the canon of "great" books that are believed to represent and shape Western culture. *The Great Books of the Western World*<sup>4</sup> and *The Harvard Classics*<sup>5</sup> are two examples of academia's attempt to assemble and categorize these works of "high culture." Since these literary canons symbolized the cultural elite as well as political and intellectual authority, they were, and in many cases still are, considered to be models for Western civilization. There has been much debate concerning this implied authority of

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<sup>2</sup> The term can be traced back in English and French to before the 12th century. The word *canon* appeared in *Le Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* in 1694 and in Furetière's *Dictionnaire* in 1690.

<sup>3</sup> In French, "canon" is also linked to writing since it also refers to "le tuyau d'une plume, la partie qui sert à écrire." It also has a significance in regards to printing and the printing press since "canon" signifies "les plus gros caractères avec lesquels on imprime."

<sup>4</sup> Assembled by the President of The University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins.

<sup>5</sup> Under the leadership of the President of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot.

the Western literary canon. Traditional canons such as *The Harvard Classics*, have often been viewed as highly subjective collections written by elite white, Christian men of power and property.

In his 1956 essay entitled "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography<sup>6</sup>," French philosopher Georges Gusdorf (1912-2000) paved the way for a literary canon of Western, autobiographical texts when he identified the genre as a mode favored by great men of Western civilization, such as Saint Augustine, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, and Gide, whom he cited as pillars. According to Gusdorf,

Many great men, and even some not so great--heads of government or generals, ministers of state, explorers, businessmen--have devoted the leisure time of their old age to editing 'Memoirs,' which have found an attentive reading public from generation to generation." The genre, he claimed, was unique to Western civilization: "It would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern particular to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe (Gusdorf in Olney, 29).

In the United States, James Olney, a professor of English at The Louisiana State University, is considered to be one of the "founding fathers" of twentieth-century autobiographical criticism. Olney has written several books on the subject including his influential work entitled *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972). As he stated in his first chapter, "A man's lifework is his fullest autobiography" (3). For Olney, the self that is created within the autobiographical text represents a metaphor for the real, writing self. Since the genre has been traditionally reserved for the lives of

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<sup>6</sup> This essay is republished in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney. See also Georges Gusdorf, "De l'autobiographie initiatique à l'autobiographie genre littéraire." *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 75 (1975): 957-94

Western men of power and affluence, his specific studies include Heraclitus, Montaigne, Darwin, and Jung. Yet while Olney did not include women, or non-Western writers, he was remarkable for being open to a wide range of autobiographical literary forms, including poetry and personal essays.

The French scholar Philippe Lejeune was not as open-minded as his American colleague in his approach to autobiography. In 1971 Lejeune wrote his first critical work on autobiography entitled *L'autobiographie en France*. In the avant-propos, Lejeune explains that the book is "une introduction à l'étude de l'autobiographie. A cette époque, il n'existait pas en France d'étude d'ensemble sur le sujet. J'avais le sentiment de partir de zéro, comme quelqu'un qui débarque sur une île inexplorée" (5). A few years later, his well-known *Pacte autobiographique* (1975) became, and still remains, *the* groundbreaking theoretical study of autobiography, and it is most famous for the much debated contract between the writer and the reader that Lejeune defined as an essential feature of the genre. Lejeune defines an autobiography as a "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" (1975, 14). This form differs from a memoir in expressing feelings and emotions. Lejeune explains that a memoir is "quelque chose qui dépasse de beaucoup l'individu, c'est l'histoire des groupes sociaux et historiques auquel il appartient" (1971, 11). The text should be in chronological order, and written late in life so as to give a nearly complete portrait of the author's lived experience. It should focus mostly on the author / subject rather than on other individuals, society or collective history. It is understood by the reader that the author,

narrator, and main character of the narrative represent one individual. The reader also assumes that the writer is writing honestly, and thus relating the events of his life in an accurate, truthful, and factual manner.

While remaining fundamental as a critical springboard, Lejeune's study was criticized for many reasons, especially its exclusion of other types of life writing, which he refers to as "les genres voisins." These other genres include memoirs, biographies, diaries, letters, autobiographical fiction, and the fictional autobiography to name just a few. What these genres have in common is their inability to meet and satisfy all of the conditions described in Lejeune's contract. Furthermore, the four "real" autobiographies analyzed by Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* were all written by canonical male French authors, notably Rousseau, Gide, Leiris, and Sartre. Thus, *Le pacte autobiographique* focuses on works that Lejeune has identified as belonging to the French canon of literary "masterpieces." Equally noteworthy, even though *Le pacte autobiographique* was published in the postcolonial era, Francophone writing outside of the Hexagon by men or women is absent from Lejeune's project.

Thirty years later, in 2005, roughly at the time when I started researching the current project, Lejeune published *Signes de vie: le pacte autobiographique 2*. This sequel is both autobiographical and auto-referential since he discusses the trajectory of autobiographical studies in relation to his own life and career. As his Preface explains: "Tant de choses ont changé en trente ans! La bibliographie finale en témoignera" (9). Yet one of the main changes concerns the general reception of autobiography:

L'écriture autobiographique est mieux acceptée," says Lejeune, while the "pacte autobiographique" remains defined as "l'engagement que prend un

auteur de raconter directement sa vie (ou une partie, ou un aspect de sa vie) dans un esprit de vérité." In this way, this pact "s'oppose au pacte de fiction," and "L'autobiographe, lui, vous promet que ce qu'il va vous dire est vrai, ou du moins est ce qu'il croit vrai (31).

While Lejeune opens the genre slightly to a few other forms, his bibliography of primary sources does not change much at all when it comes to the discussion of women, marginal writers, and Francophone texts.

As the above survey makes clear, while men and women throughout history and across the globe may have felt the desire to share their own personal experiences with an audience or a public, the need, the desire, and / or the possibility to focus on the self vary with time and the culture in question. As we know, the word *autobiography* comes from the Greek words *auton* which means "Self," *bios* which means "life," and *graphein* "write." An autobiography is thus a biography written by the subject or composed conjointly with a collaborative writer. While the term dates from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the form itself is much older. Saint Augustine, Montaigne, and Rousseau are the three writers who are systematically mentioned by most literary critics. Saint Augustine (354-430) was born in the old city of Tagaste, which is now called Souk Ahras, in present day Algeria. His mother was a Berber, and profoundly Catholic. After several years as a teacher of rhetoric, in Carthage and Milan, Augustine converted to the Catholic faith, moved back to North Africa, founded a monastic community, and later became the bishop of Hippo, also in Algeria. His writings had a lasting impact on Christian and Western thought and as a result, Augustine was canonized as a saint at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. His *Confessions* are often referred to as the first known autobiographical text of the Western tradition. When speaking of Augustine's

*Confessions*, in her book *Autobiographical Voices*, Françoise Lionnet identifies the work as a "founding document of Western autobiographical discourse" (37). Although this series of thirteen books written between 397 and 400 AD does not represent an account of his entire life<sup>7</sup>, they do discuss his youth, his schooling, his family, and important friendships. Their ultimate function, however, was to show the spiritual journey of Augustine's life up to the moment of his conversion. For other scholars, who relate the self-centered autobiographic impulse to Renaissance Humanism and the rise of individualism, it is Montaigne (1533-1592) who wrote the first (semi) autobiographical text. As Montaigne says "Au Lecteur" at the beginning of his *Essais* (1580), "C'est moi que je peins" and "Je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre" (xxiii). And yet two centuries later, Augustine's *Confessions* still influenced other Western writers, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose own *Confessions* were published posthumously between 1781 and 1789. As this brief review suggests, autobiography is difficult to classify and identify as a narrowly-defined genre.

Indeed, keeping in mind Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical contract, it is necessary to define briefly several of the other genres of life-writing that will later be the focus this study. The genre referred to as the memoir is usually considered as a literary subclass of autobiography, although it is an older form of writing. Memoir comes from the Latin *memoria*, meaning "memory." Thus, the term "memoir" predates "autobiography", which appeared in the English language at the end of the eighteenth century. Prior to the end of the eighteenth century, autobiography was referred to simply

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine wrote them when he was in his forties and he lived much longer.

as a memoir (Boynton and Malin 379). Memoirs may also appear less structured and less encompassing than formal autobiographical works. A memoir will typically focus on the external, public aspect of the writer as he or she is discussed and understood in relation to those events. Memoirs are usually about part of a life, often a public part, rather than the chronological telling of a life from childhood to adulthood / old age. A memoir also tends to lack the more intimate focus on the author's own memories, feelings and emotions that an autobiography tends to have.

Diaries or personal journals represent one of the oldest forms of autobiographical writing. The word *diary* comes from Latin *dies* which means "day." According to Boynton and Malin diaries are different from other forms of autobiographical writing since they "lack closure" and are typically "unfolding without a sense of beginning or end" (190). A diary or a journal is a book for writing private entries that usually describe the events of the day or another specific time period. Historically, the diary is recognized as one of the earliest forms of women's autobiography (Boynton and Malin 190). A diary can be viewed as a discursive space for recording private thoughts and emotions as well as a record of the day's or week's events. Traditionally, only members of the upper classes wrote in diaries. From the Renaissance to the twentieth century it was very common for famous historical and literary figures to write in a diary. Diaries and journals are important sources for authors when they write memoirs, biographies, and traditional autobiographies, as we shall see in Chapter 1 of this study that examines portions of Elisabeth Lacoin's private diary.

The body of literature known as *autobiographical fiction* contains several forms including the novel with a key, the autobiographical novel, and the semi-autobiographical novel. According to Boynton's and Malin's encyclopedia:

Autobiographical fiction is often written as a means for a writer to create a space for her voice that has generally been marginalized and rendered powerless. The relationship between marginalized writers and autobiographical fiction is fairly clear when one considers the number of disempowered writers from non-Western cultures who write autobiographical fiction (88).

In addition, autobiographical fiction provides evidence of some of the pitfalls of the autobiographical genre such as the author's imperfect memory, her (re)interpretation of events, and the common desire to present events in a favorable manner for the reading public. Autobiographical fiction is closely related to another sub-genre known as the *fictional autobiography*. In a fictional autobiography, the author creates a new persona in order to write an autobiography for someone who never existed. The life-narrative of Véronica Mercier in Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* is an example of a fictional autobiography.

Letters or epistles represent yet another sub-category of life-writing. The word "epistle" comes from the Greek word *epistolos* which means a written "letter" addressed to a recipient or recipients that may be part of exchanged correspondence. An epistolary novel is a literary work that is structured around the writing and exchange of letters. The role of letters in communication has changed significantly since the 19th century. Historically, letters were the only reliable means of communication between people separated geographically. The development of technology over the last century has made the exchange of personal letters less common since people communicate via the

telephone and the internet. Letters and postcards contained in national archives serve as valuable sources of information for historians and biographers. Boynton's and Malin's encyclopedia points out that "letters are always autobiographical" (360)

We will see later in this study that women's autobiographical narratives are quite often *biographical* in nature. The first known biographies were written by scribes commissioned by the various rulers of antiquity. The earliest surviving biographical texts are from the fifth century B.C. The genre is still viewed as heavily patriarchal in nature. Biography is different from autobiography in that a scholar, writer or historian must collect all of the information about the subject either through interviews or archival research. Sometimes the biographer was close to the subject such as a spouse, sibling or friend. In this case, the biographer also relied on his / her memory of the individual in order to construct the narrative.

The canonization of autobiographies written by men changed only very recently. In 2005, the same year in fact that Lejeune published *Le pacte autobiographique II*, in which he only slightly changed his views on the subject, Greenwood Press published a two-volume *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography* (2005) edited by Victoria Boynton and Jo Malin. Based on the contributions of numerous feminist scholars from many different fields, its more than two hundred entries did not only fill a tremendous gap, but in their own way, they canonized a corpus that was geographically, culturally, and formally very diverse. In addition to focusing on gender, race, and class, these pieces also included various genres that Lejeune, and others, excluded as borderline or marginal, such as letters, diaries, collaborative life narratives, or autobiographical fiction. All of

these genres have been appropriated by women as autobiographical mediums for a variety of socio-cultural reasons.

Throughout the history of France, women have played a significant role in the establishment of what we know today as French Literature. One of the first known texts written in the vernacular of Gaul in the 9th century is in fact centered around the life of a woman. While I recognize that the anonymous *Sequence of Saint Eulalia* (c. 880-882) is not autobiographical, I find it significant for the biographic way it eulogized the saint's life. Since then, many women started writing themselves, not without many difficulties, as Virginia Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own 1929*: "Give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days" (94). However, when one considers the works of Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Hélienne de Crenne, Marguerite de Navarre, Madeleine de Scudéry, or Madame de Sévigné, among many others in France, women's writing in France has a long and rich history.

Prior to the twentieth century, in part because it was not "lady-like" or "proper" for a woman to write about and publish the personal intimate details of her life, autobiographies appear to have been written primarily by European men, with the possible exception of the *Mémoires*, inspired by Rousseau's *Confessions*, that Madame Roland wrote while awaiting her execution, or George Sand's *romans champêtres*<sup>8</sup> inspired by her own childhood, as well as *Histoire de ma vie* (1855), and *Elle et Lui* (1859). However, women's life-writing is so abundant in the twentieth century that it can

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<sup>8</sup> Among these romans champêtres are *La mare au diable* (1846), *La petite Fadette* (1849) and *François le champi* (1847-1848)

be labeled as the "heyday" of women's autobiographical expression, both within France and throughout the greater French-speaking world. One of the first French-speaking women of the twentieth century to write autobiographically is Simone de Beauvoir, whose famous work *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) shaped Western feminism, while her extensive autobiographical project which includes *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958) *La force de l'âge* (1960), *La force des choses* (1963) and *Tout compte fait* (1972), served as models for autobiographical novels that would be the products of later generations. Among these later texts are Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) and *Avec mon meilleur souvenir* (1984), Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* (1983), Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984), as well as Annie Ernaux's *La place* (1983) and *Une femme* (1987) which is an account of her mother's death that has been compared to Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* (1964). During this proliferation of hexagonal autobiographies, French-speaking women autobiographers from the colonized regions of the globe were also writing and publishing narratives in French that related their lived experience during both the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Female-authored autobiographical narratives have been produced by slaves and indentured servants, Native Americans, African Americans, and Aborigines as well as by women in India, Egypt the South Pacific, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and South America. Yet as we have already seen, despite this surge, women's autobiographies received little critical recognition in literary studies. The scholarship of recent decades has radically changed this situation, at a time when autobiography as a genre has exploded into many other forms. The technology of the world wide web now offers even

more choices to individuals around the globe to express, record, and showcase themselves, with such popular sites as Face Book, MySpace.com, blogs or personal web pages. In addition, email has become the epistolary correspondence of choice for millions of writers worldwide; and as critics have noted, many life stories are also communicated non-linguistically, through art forms such as painting, basket weaving, pottery, not to mention dance, music, sculpture, photography, and film. As Marjane Satrapi's recent *Persepolis* (2007) shows, an animated film based on a graphic novel may represent yet another possible art form of autobiographical expression for women.

Several theoretical concepts have proven helpful to my study in providing valuable insight into the nature, limitations, and power of the autobiographical impulse. The first one is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) "Master-Slave Dialectic," a philosophical essay in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that explores not only the notions of power struggles, inequality, and equality, domination and subordination, but the concept of identity. According to Hegel, individuals are not born with an instinctive sense of self awareness. Rather, they must go through an intricate process that involves the encounter of another human being which leads them both to act as a mirror for the other.

Influenced in part by Hegel's essay, the mirror theory proposed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) also provides some important insight into autobiographical studies. According to his philosophy, the ego or the "I" is born after a child, much like Narcissus viewing his own image in the surface of a pond, identifies the Self in the mirror, an inanimate object through which the once fragmented body is made

whole. Like the reflecting image in the mirror, as a linguistic production and creation of the writing self, autobiographical writing can be viewed as a manifestation of Lacan's imaginary dimension of the psyche. Yet as a reflection, that image and the sense of wholeness, order, and unity are also fictions and thus distorted visions of the self, a concept that had an important impact on many critics of autobiography.

The last theoretical work I would like to mention is Edward Said's (1935-2003) ground-breaking *Orientalism*, published in 1978. As we know, it had and still has a formidable impact on many disciplines, and helped revise and shape Colonial and Postcolonial Studies. By simultaneously shedding light on, and denouncing the West's construction of, a *fictional* Orient or Oriental Other, Said demonstrated how various forms of Western cultural production assured the continuation of European hegemony. However, I have also found Said's work particularly valuable for my study due to his emphasis on an individual's capacity to alter or influence the course of history. Such a celebration of the individual has important implications not only for writers in general but for autobiographers in particular, especially in colonial and postcolonial times, when autobiographical writing becomes a form of resistance to regimes and power structures that often led to the silencing of subordinated groups.

A number of recent comparative studies have focused on autobiographies written by French-speaking women. In 1989, Françoise Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices* analyzed *Race, Gender, and Self-Portraiture*. Beginning with Saint Augustine and Nietzsche, her work explored the cultural politics surrounding *métissage* in the works of Maryse Condé, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, Marie Cardinal, and Marie-Thérèse

Humbert. In 1990, Leah Hewitt's *Autobiographical Tightropes* focused on gender, race, and identity in texts by Beauvoir, Duras, Sarraute, Condé, and Wittig. In 1996, Raylene Ramsay published *The French New Autobiographies*, on Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet. That same year, Martine Mathieu contributed her *Littératures Autobiographiques de la Francophonie*, whereas five years later, Anne Donadey's *Recasting Postcolonialism* (2001) analyzed the writings of Assia Djebar and Leila Sebbar within the postcolonial context. Several collaborative studies have also informed and helped define my research. In 1988, for instance, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck co-edited a collection of essays entitled *Life / Lines* that highlighted texts from several countries including France, England, and the United States. That same year, *The Private Self*, edited by Shari Benstock, contained articles on such autobiographers as Jane Austen, Simone de Beauvoir, and Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1992 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson published *De/Colonizing the Subject*, a collection of essays by eighteen different contributors that analyzed how subaltern women wrote autobiographically in previously colonized regions of the globe.

Despite the plethora of publications on autobiography, my project is different from existing scholarship in several ways. By focusing on the ways in which the autobiographic canon has changed, it deals with a different grouping of hexagonal and Francophone texts than those mentioned above. The project also includes films produced exclusively by women. I have selected artists of three different generations whose collective personal paths, writings, and films lead from Paris to the “colonies” and back to France: Simone de Beauvoir and Elisabeth Lacoïn spent most of their time in

Paris, while the second-generation of writers, Maryse Condé and Assia Djebar, were born in the colonies. The last artist examined in this study, Yamina Benguigui, was born in France like Beauvoir and Lacoïn. In this way, the structure of this study and the specific order of the works and artists analyzed parallel the colonial and postcolonial trajectory.

Several feminist scholars have proposed that women's autobiographical expression follows certain stylistic and thematic trends that are not typically found in the life-writings of men. When speaking about "French and Francophone Women's Autobiography in the Twentieth Century," Nicole Meyer suggests that "recent women's autobiographies demonstrate and enact the author's discovery of her own individual voice and the relationship of that voice to the social cacophony that surrounds her" (123). Thus, according to Meyer, writing becomes a way of stabilizing and calming both the internal chaos of the self and the external chaos of society. Many critics have also stressed that women's autobiographies will frequently discuss common themes such as their body, menstruation, childbirth, maternity, motherhood, and mother-daughter relationships. Yet as Françoise Lionnet remarks, "Women's voices do not and will never constitute a 'minority discourse'" (xi). While these body-centered themes are indeed present in many female-authored texts, focusing on them at the expense of other themes reinforces, I contend, the stereotypical discourse of "Anatomy becomes destiny" that limits women's agency to reproduction.

As Judith Butler reminds us in *Gender Trouble* (1990), "Gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural

intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (3). The act of representing the colonial legacy is so central to Francophone autobiographies that one can safely say that the colonial experience is the *sine qua non* of Francophone life-writings. Power structures throughout colonial systems are habitually divided into a series of binary categories which include colonizer / colonized, Third World / First World and white / non-white. Yet the colonial experience is also a gendered reality. As Ania Loomba and other critics have noted, Third World women and women of color provide the cheapest labor for sweatshops, the sex-trade, large multinationals as well as smaller industries; they are often the guinea pigs for exploitative and dangerous experiments in health and fertility. This exploitation is both a colonial legacy and the outcome of specific 'postcolonial' developments (Loomba 172). In the French-speaking world, colonization, decolonization and the shift to an "independent," postcolonial or neo-colonial era produced some of the most complex and harrowing systems of human relations imaginable. As men found their former roles in public space severely restricted, they exerted increasing power in the private space of the home, with devastating effects on women. Yet at the same time as the French school system that created and canonized "classic" authors promoted gendered roles and enforced the colonial machine within the *salle de classe*, it also provided each of the writers I am analyzing with the linguistic capability as well as the intellectual ammunition to protest against them. While intellectuals, writers, and political activists sought independence from French hegemony, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the migration of Algerians,

Moroccans, and Tunisians to the Hexagon itself, which created yet another complex system of human relations, as well as many socio-political challenges.

Following Butler's injunction, the analysis of the autobiographies selected for this study does not "separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections" (Butler 3); indeed it seeks to show that they are structured by socio-political debates of their times not only because of their thematic contents but because of their textual strategies. First and foremost, autobiographical writing itself is a method of protest, and thus a way for the "second-sex" or "subaltern" subjects to write themselves into literary history, which is already a significant act of female agency. These women also use pseudonyms or pen names to disguise, or re-name themselves, within literary space. In addition, they frequently double as biographers, intertwining their own personal narratives with the stories of family members, friends, teachers, and lovers. This form of ventriloquism, I contend, gives a voice and a place to others who are usually underrepresented within the dominant social discourse. As a result, women's autobiographical writings are polyphonic, for within each autobiography, there is often an entire chorus of life stories to be uncovered. When using film as a medium of expression, these women also re-insert a form of "oralité" which, in addition to reaching a larger audience with varying degrees of literacy, makes possible a shift in gendered roles, as the female cinematographer captures and returns the male gaze via the new I/eye of the filmmaker and her camera. Finally, in dealing with such issues as *scolarité* and education as well as familial and extra-familial bonds, this project shows how, through their writing, these women take ownership of, and colonize or cannibalize the French language by infusing it with Parisian slang,

Verlan, Creole, Malinké, Berber, or Arabic. In doing so, language is used as a weapon that is turned back on the colonizers themselves. All of these different strategies analyzed in my study show that the personal (autobiographical) is indeed very political.

I would like to explain how and why I chose the particular texts and writers of this study. In *Autobiographical Voices* Françoise Lionnet remarks:

We women are so diverse and live in such varied cultural, racial, and economic circumstances that we cannot possibly pretend to speak in a single voice. It is by listening to a plurality of voices from various corners of the planet and across centuries that we will strengthen our ability to resist demeaning power structures without risk of being recuperated by current or trendy professionalism within our academic disciplines (xi).

The five writers from France, Guadeloupe, and Algeria that I have selected represent this plurality of situations and French-speaking voices. Beauvoir and Lacoïn were born in Paris exactly a century ago. The second generation of writers, Djébar and Condé, were born in 1936 and 1937 respectively, and witnessed the transition from a colonial to a postcolonial era; although they were born in the colonies, both were educated in Paris, like Lacoïn and Beauvoir. Yamina Benguigui, a second-generation immigrant born in Lille in 1957, during the height of the Algerian war, is a French citizen who also shares the rich Algerian heritage of her parents. All of these women, with the exception of Lacoïn, have received various, prestigious international awards. As this study will show, their works present a *métissage* of autobiographical forms which include memoirs, biography, letters, personal diaries, short stories, a film journal, autobiographical fiction, a fictitious autobiography, historical narratives, and film documentaries. While the works of Beauvoir and Lacoïn focus on their schooling, youth and relationships in France, the writings of Condé and Djébar take the reader beyond the borders of the Hexagon to the

colonized countries of the French empire, and Yamina Benguigui's documentary highlights the migration of formerly colonized subjects to the Hexagon during the postcolonial era. Despite their diversity and differences, these life-narratives have many points in common, as the four chapters of this comparative study will show.

In Chapter 1, *Writing The Bourgeoisie: The Autobiographical Narratives of Simone de Beauvoir and Elisabeth Lacoïn*, works written by the two women are read in pair. Along with her first work of autobiographical fiction entitled *Quand prime le spirituel* (1935-1937; pub. 1979), the first volume of Beauvoir's autobiography, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), is considered to be not only the author's autobiography but biographical in nature since these memoirs also function as a eulogy of Lacoïn's short life. In 1991, more than sixty years after Elisabeth's death, a collection of her own letters, poems, and journal entries was published under the title *Zaza: Correspondance et carnets d'Elisabeth Lacoïn 1914-1929*. An analysis of this work, together with *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, shows how Beauvoir is able to actively protest the cultural codes and values of the bourgeois world in which she grew up, while Lacoïn's letters and journal entries reveal her own struggles within this rigid social class.

Chapter 2, *Framing the Fragmented Self and Other(s): Maryse Condé's Le coeur à rire et à pleurer (1999) and Heremakhonon (1976)*, investigates how the Guadeloupean writer, much like Simone de Beauvoir, employs autobiographical writing as a form of revolt against the bourgeois mentality and the way of life that defined her childhood years, criticizing her social class in a way that repudiates many of her parents' values. Published in 1999, *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* is one of Condé's most autobiographical

novels. This collection of autobiographical short stories explores the way in which the Caribbean child navigates and unravels adult issues such as colonial stereotypes, social class, linguistic issues, and the racial divisions of Guadeloupe's three-tiered society. These autobiographical tales are read alongside of the first autobiographical novel, *Heremakhonon*, that Condé wrote in 1976. A fictitious autobiography embedded within the novel contains the story of a woman who travels to West Africa in search of a mythical pre-colonial past, and who comes to realize the limitations and fallacies of the Negritude movement. Comparisons are made between the coming of age of both the novel's main character Véronica Mercier, and Maryse Condé in order to show how they developed a similar sense of their own selfhood within the postcolonial matrix.

Chapter 3, entitled *Writing, Space, and Visual Imagery in Assia Djebar's Unfinished Autobiographical Quartet*, examines the first three volumes of Assia Djebar's incomplete narrative, and takes into account the role of women's life-writing within the French-speaking Arab world. For Assia Djebar, writing is fundamental to the preservation of memory and history, and is simultaneously a method of uncovering silenced voices from the past. This study shows that, like Beauvoir, Lacoïn, and Condé, Djebar's autobiographical writing privileges the themes of reclaiming space and memory, while questioning gender roles, language, and education. This chapter also pays particular attention to the way Djebar uses visual imagery within her autobiographical texts when history, fiction, and the shooting of a film become intertwined.

The final chapter, *Shooting The Canon: Autobiographical Narratives From Page to Screen*, considers the relationship between life-writing, autobiographical cinema, and

the many cultural issues that arise when women's personal narratives and lived experiences are adapted into films. Showing how the art of documentary is used as a form of biography and autobiography, this chapter focuses on Assia Djébar's and Yamina Benguigui's films and the role their camera plays in portraying key postcolonial themes such as immigration, and the (re)definition of identity. Like Benguigui's three-part documentary entitled *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage Maghrébin* (1997), Assia Djébar uses the motion picture screen as a means of recovering and unfolding the life narratives of women and children from the mountainous region of Kabylia. *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1977) became a classic, and Djébar became known world-wide as Algeria's first female filmmaker.

As I hope to show, the autobiographers in this study are shooting a unique and powerful can(n)on of their own.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**WRITING THE BOURGEOISIE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES**  
**OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND ELISABETH LACOIN**

"Et les aurores se rallument parce que j'écris."

Assia Djebar, *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985)

**Beauvoir's Autobiographies**

Although autobiographical expression of any kind can never give a full and complete picture of any individual, what is so seductive about life-writing in its many forms is the privileged glimpse of the author's life, thoughts, and experiences that it offers the reader. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first French-speaking women to write and publish a lengthy, multi-volume autobiography that portrays not only her private, inner world, but also her rich career and public life as one of France's leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. Her myriad publications provided women of her generation and those that would follow with a stunning example of female-authored life-writing. Beauvoir is one of the most important French autobiographers of the twentieth century, and her works belong to and have helped establish a new canon of women's autobiographical writing. By writing autobiographically at a time when it was not common for women to publicly expose the private self, Beauvoir came to represent the vanguard of a feminine, autobiographical tradition that would emerge and flourish throughout the twentieth century. Many French-speaking women of later generations followed in Beauvoir's footsteps as they too wrote and published the true tales of their lives. As Deirdre Bair explains, "There has been no other woman, in contemporary literature who has been so completely associated with the major events, causes, and

actions of her society. Language is Simone de Beauvoir's chosen instrument" (162). Indeed, Beauvoir used her writing to tell her own story, and to become engaged in the social, political, and intellectual events of the twentieth century. Like a time capsule, her multi-volume autobiography presents a specific vision of intellectual and student life in Paris, the major historical and political events of an era, and the philosophies and contemporary thought of Sartre and their group of existentialist cohorts.

Simone de Beauvoir is famous for saying, "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" (*Deuxième sexe* 285). To study Simone de Beauvoir is to enter into an epistemological task that almost seems Sisyphean in nature since the more that is learned, the less one seems to know and understand about this remarkable woman. Beauvoir lost her faith at the age of fifteen and lost her best and most cherished friend at the age of twenty-one, the same year that she became the youngest French citizen to earn the *agrégation* in philosophy. Affectionately nick-named "The Beaver" by her colleague René Maheu,<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir identified herself as a philosopher, an intellectual, and a writer. A woman who spent her entire life within the intellectual elite of twentieth-century Paris, she was a regular at famous left bank cafes such as Café de Flore, Le Select, and La Coupole. In 1954 she was awarded Le Prix Goncourt for *Les Mandarins*. She traveled the world, lived through both world wars, and published numerous essays, as well as works of fiction, newspaper articles, and a lengthy autobiography.

Often referred to as the Mother of Western feminism, Beauvoir paved the way for generations of feminist scholars and writers; yet she was simultaneously criticized by

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<sup>9</sup> Because the spelling of "Beauvoir" resembled "Beaver." She was thus called "Castor" in French.

some Western feminists for lacking femininity and for employing what has been referred to as a phallogentric style and language in her writing. Nevertheless, she played a vital and essential role within the women's movement and within the history of (Western) feminism. Her participation in key socio-political events is recorded in detail throughout the volumes of her autobiography. She advocated abortion rights and contraception at a time when these subjects were not spoken of in public.<sup>10</sup> She signed the Manifesto of the 343 which was published in the *Nouvel Observateur* in the spring of 1971. By adding her signature to the manifesto she stated, "I have had an abortion and I demand this right for all women" (Appignanesi 162). During the Second World War she wrote for an underground resistance newspaper called *Combat*, directed by Albert Camus. Later, she spoke out against the French military and colonial policy in Algeria and supported an Africa free from colonial hegemony. As a result of her unpopular political stance, she received death threats while her Montparnasse apartments and hotel rooms became the targets of terrorist plots. She and Jean-Paul Sartre achieved celebrity status, and in 1978 Beauvoir was the central subject of a film produced by Josée Dayan. In her biography of Beauvoir, Lisa Appignanesi explains that "if we look at her from within her own historical moment, her limitations seem at once more comprehensible and the scope of her achievement, her ability to transmit across to other generations, all the more remarkable" (5). Today, the name Beauvoir surfaces across many academic disciplines including literary studies, political science, philosophy, Women's Studies, and Cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Abortion and the sale of contraceptives were made illegal in France in 1920. In 1967 the sale of contraceptives was legalized again, but with many restrictions. Abortion was made legal in 1974 as a result of feminist and social movements in France.

Studies. One hundred years after Beauvoir's birth, her work continues to inspire countless books, essays, and scholarly articles. She is loved and hated, misunderstood, criticized, worshipped, and immortalized throughout the world.

In the introduction to their work entitled *Simone de Beauvoir, A Life, A Love Story*, her biographers Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier describe the difficult task of piecing together the events of Beauvoir's life: "According to Beauvoir's mood, we heard different versions of events" (xiii). They further explain the limits of memory and the difficulties that arise when interviewing authors about their writing:

Reality does not always fit into molds. Ambiguities, contradictions, the unforeseen succession of events creates twilight zones. De Beauvoir gave a certain order to the story of her life; she structured her narrative and restructured her life. We came to realize that she could not accept easily and without pain the reality that her story would be retold by others and seen through eyes other than her own (xv).

These two critics were not the only individuals who found it difficult to transcribe the events of Beauvoir's life. Like any autobiographer, Simone de Beauvoir had to face challenges and questions about the structure and content of her autobiography as she composed the narratives of her life: How much does one tell? How is the narrative presented to the reader? What is left out or withheld? What is the relationship between fiction and life-writing? Who will be the (intended) public of readers?

This chapter does not propose an analysis of *all* of Simone de Beauvoir's life-writing for such a task would require a much longer discussion than this chapter will allow. Rather, I will focus on *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958) and *Quand*

*prime le spirituel* (1979)<sup>11</sup> since both works portray Beauvoir's adolescence as well as her close friendship with Elisabeth Lacoïn. I will also discuss Elisabeth Lacoïn's own collection of letters and journal entries that were published by members of her family after her death under the title *Zaza: Correspondance et carnets d'Elisabeth Lacoïn 1914-1929* (1991) in order to compare and contrast both the form and the content of all three works. In particular, I will analyze the way that they represent the bourgeoisie, the origins and the trajectory of the two women's friendship, issues of *scolarité*, family filiations, space, and personal freedom. We will see how one of the girls turned to her faith in God and the Church while the other found her light in philosophy, literature, and political activism. One of the girls died under mysterious circumstances when her life was just beginning, while the other lived a long, rich, and successful life.

It is important to study *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, *Quand prime le spirituel*, and *Zaza: Correspondance et carnets* together, for all three works tell a version of the same story as they relate events from Simone's<sup>12</sup> and Elisabeth's childhood until the girls reached their early twenties. Perhaps more importantly, there is an interior dialogue between all three texts since they make reference to each other. Rather than focusing on the truth and fiction of events recorded within the three texts, I will focus on what each text communicates to the reader while situating all three texts within the arena of women's life-writing. Liliane Lazar explains that "the heroines of Beauvoir's stories are searching for freedom, struggling to become liberated, and rebelling against the limited

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<sup>11</sup> Even though this work was not published until 1979 it was written between 1935 and 1937. In 1937 Beauvoir sent her manuscript to Gallimard and to Grasset, both publishers rejected the work for publication. In 1979 Gallimard asked her permission to publish the work.

<sup>12</sup> I propose to refer to the girls as "Simone" and "Elisabeth" when discussing their childhood years up until Elisabeth's death at the age of 21.

female roles available to them in their society" (29). Similarly, Elisabeth Lacoïn's *Correspondance et carnets* reveals the author's struggle to find her own personal space in a milieu that was increasingly limiting her freedom. Finally, *Correspondance et carnets* also contains visual imagery in the form of photos of friends and family members as well as photos of Simone and Elisabeth. While *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* and *Quand prime le spirituel* do not contain any photos, there are important discussions of and references to photos in both texts. In this way, the writings of Beauvoir and Lacoïn incorporate visual imagery within their texts as a means of revealing the private self.

While this chapter focuses on Simone de Beauvoir's work of autobiographical fiction entitled *Quand prime le spirituel* and the first volume of her autobiography, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, I would like to briefly outline some of Beauvoir's other autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works. In 1960, Beauvoir published the second volume of her autobiography entitled *La force de l'âge*. This second volume continues the story of Beauvoir's life roughly at the same time in which *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* ends. Thus, the narrative begins in 1929 and ends with the Liberation of Paris in 1944. The description of her life with Jean-Paul Sartre plays a much larger role in this narrative than in the first volume. She also discusses political events, her writing career, descriptions of the war, and conditions in Paris under the occupation. Published in 1963, the third volume, *La force des choses*, begins its narrative with the liberation of Paris in 1944, and covers the events of Beauvoir's life up until the fall of 1962. This third volume portrays the development of her writing career and her philosophies, as well as an account of the instant fame and celebrity status that she and

Sartre experienced after the war. In addition, this volume contains detailed accounts of Beauvoir's and Sartre's travels abroad, which included trips to Brazil, Russia, Italy, and Spain. The volume discusses the Algerian War and Beauvoir's unpopular stance in relation to French colonial policy. It is important to note that Beauvoir was closer in time to the events in this work and thus, according to Terry Keefe "lack[ed] the kind of detachment and self-criticism that characterizes the earlier volumes" (38). Beauvoir also dedicated a significant amount of time to reflections on aging and the theme of death.

The declining health and death of Beauvoir's mother inspired the writing and publication of *Une mort très douce* in 1964. This work, which is both biographical and autobiographical in nature, is an account of her mother's decline and death as well as a critique of the way that Western society treats the elderly. Beauvoir relates the way in which she and her sister Hélène reacted to and dealt with the loss of their mother. The narrative contains a detailed and disturbing description of the decline of her mother's body within a discourse that has been described as scientific and clinical. In 1972 Beauvoir published another autobiographical volume entitled *Tout compte fait*. This work differs from the other three previously published autobiographical volumes in that it does not follow a chronological order. The first chapter examines her life in its entirety. The rest of the volume considers certain aspects of her life that took place after the publication of *La force des choses*, such as her relationship with Sylvie Le Bon, her role in international politics, and her travel abroad.

In 1947, just after the end of World War II and during the period of the Cold War, Beauvoir spent four months in the United States in order to learn first-hand about

America and Americans. Her trip to the United States resulted in the writing and publication of a work of travel literature entitled *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (1948) that gives a detailed account of her day-to-day activities in the United States. The work presents her view of American culture, as well as the beginning of her romance with the American novelist Nelson Algren. As she traveled from coast to coast, speaking at universities across America, Beauvoir learned about American culture and wrote down her observations in her journal. She was shocked by racial divisions, as well as by the poverty of the lower classes.

In addition to her autobiographical texts and travel narratives, Beauvoir wrote fictional and philosophical narratives that portrayed the lives of men and women in Paris. Written and published during the Second World War, *L'invitée* is an example of what Beauvoir identifies as a metaphysical novel. *L'invitée* is believed to be the first work that announces Beauvoir's philosophy. Although it is usually read as a work of fiction, many of the events and characters within the novel were inspired by Beauvoir's real-life experiences. The triangular relationship of Pierre, Xavière and Françoise is believed to have been modeled after the trio that Beauvoir and Sartre formed with Olga Kosakiewicz. In 1954 Beauvoir's novel *Les mandarins* won the *Prix Goncourt*. The main characters, Anne Dubreuilh and her husband Robert, share striking similarities to Beauvoir and Sartre while Lewis Brogan seems to have been modeled after Nelson Algren. This narrative gives a detailed account of the difficult choices and burdens faced by intellectuals of the left bank of Paris during the second half of the twentieth century.

### Reading Beauvoir

Life-writing is the pillar of Beauvoir's literary career. One can say that she wrote to live and lived to write. From early childhood, writing was a fundamental need for Beauvoir while books and literature played a central and pivotal role. The many volumes of her autobiography are representative of the *literature engagée* that she promoted throughout her adult life. Yolanda Patterson explains that for Beauvoir, "the written word is a means of reaching out to people with whom she would otherwise not have any contact. From the time she was an adolescent, Beauvoir wanted to share everything in her life with her readers" (156). Ursula Tidd discusses the fact that Beauvoir's autobiographical writing has often been criticized for its mythologisation of historical events (253). Many scholars find fault with her discussion and inclusion of historical events such as the Holocaust since she did not directly witness or experience the events in question. According to Tidd:

Reading her autobiography uniquely as commissive testimony positions Beauvoir as an authoritative subject who is bound to tell the whole truth and produces her as a selective, mythologizing autobiographer. Her authority may be deemed questionable because patriarchy has traditionally positioned women as unreliable witnesses in relation to truth-telling, and constituted masculine truths as universal and more 'reliable.' Her use of diverse autobiographical forms (memoirs, diary, letters) may also be a reason for some to question her status as witness because 'truth' of the self is not articulated in a coherent, homogeneous, autobiographical whole (256).

Despite the fact that Beauvoir writes about events that she did not directly participate in such as the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima or the Algerian War, the fact that she wrote about and included these events in her autobiographical writings is significant and worthy of serious study. Beauvoir's autobiographical texts discuss and

record the major world events that the author was privy to and aware of during her lifetime. According to Mary O'Brien,

The paradox Beauvoir neglects to recognize--along with some of her critics--is that in writing an autobiography, the autobiographer cannot avoid self-contemplation and at least some degree of narcissism. Autobiography is a literary form which by its very nature demands sustained focus on self and which cannot avoid self-absorption and self-display. Moreover, in the Western tradition, autobiography has always been a site that privileges subjectivity and authority. At least in her autobiography, Beauvoir can claim the right--as can every autobiographer, male or female--to make of her life--her experience, her personality, her essence--the subject of her own discourse and to relate that experience in her own voice, according to her own lights (174).

When reading the volumes of Beauvoir's autobiography, one encounters a rich cast of characters that were central figures in her life. Many of her friends and family members are referred to by their real names. However, Beauvoir does lend pseudonyms to certain individuals. For example, in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is known as "Jean Pradelle" while Elisabeth Lacoin is known as Elisabeth Mabile. This use of pseudonyms for some and not for others provides insight into how Beauvoir viewed these individuals and their right to an added layer of privacy within the text. Although Sartre is not referred to by a pseudonym, Beauvoir shields or protects him in her autobiography in other ways. She is very careful with what she reveals and what is kept private. For example, very little is said about their intimate life together. Topics such as sexuality and the body, as well as her own jealousy about Sartre's myriad love affairs with other women, are rarely discussed. When, after her death, a lengthy work entitled *Lettres à Sartre et à quelques autres*, and another work known as *Journal de Guerre* were published, in 1990, her sister Héléne de Beauvoir was

hurt and publicly embarrassed by some of the critical statements made about her. Not only did H el ene de Beauvoir have access to writings never intended for her eyes, but they were made public to the entire world. Journals, letters, and diaries are the private space of the author and they are usually not meant to be read by the public. For this reason, journals and letters often serve as primary sources of information for autobiographers as they piece together the narratives of their life. Throughout her life, Beauvoir kept detailed journals and wrote thousands of letters to friends and family members. When writing her autobiography she referred to these documents as well as family photos in order to bring lost memories and details back to life.

### **Beauvoir and Intertextuality**

Books played a significant role in Simone de Beauvoir's life since her early childhood. As a young child, Beauvoir was inspired by many French writers from the established literary canon as well as contemporary writers such as Paul Claudel, Raymond Radiguet, Jean Cocteau, St ephane Mallarm e, Marcel Proust, Alain Fournier, and Andr e Gide to name a few. Susan Bainbrigge states that

the numerous references by Beauvoir to Rousseau and to Other (male) autobiographers throughout her four volumes of autobiography indicate the influence of the male-authored French autobiographical canon on Beauvoir's writing. Paradoxically, the author demonstrates a desire to belong to this canon, and yet also subverts it in various ways (129).

Regardless of her original intention(s), Beauvoir's multi-volume autobiography has served as a model and stepping stone for many other French-speaking women autobiographers of the twentieth century. At the same time, Beauvoir has been criticized

by feminists and other scholars for having a literary voice that is distinctly male in nature because of her frank, and straight forward style as well as her discussion of public and historical events, rather than just her inner, sentimental world. Like many male autobiographers, Beauvoir discusses intellectual ideas as well as her studies and her path to international fame and popularity. Historically, only men wrote about themselves in this manner. Beauvoir was one of the very first women in France to appropriate the male-dominated genre of autobiography. Guillemine de Lacoste explains that

Beauvoir had indeed lived like a free bachelor, not keeping house, not getting married, not having children. And she had thought and created like a man, publishing many books and becoming a famous woman. However, she had also acted like a woman in love, losing herself in the superior being whom she believed she could not possibly equal (1994, 64).

In addition to reading works of fiction and non-fiction by a wealth of French writers, Beauvoir was particularly moved by the American writer Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*, which was published in 1869. The young Simone began reading Alcott's novel at the age of ten, in 1919, thus shortly after the end of the war. Not surprisingly, Simone identified with the struggles of Jo March who was precocious, intellectual, and in love with literature. In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* she discusses the impact of Alcott's work:

Il y a eu un livre où je crus reconnaître mon visage et mon destin: *Little Women*, de Louisa Alcott. Les petites March étaient protestantes, elles avaient pour père un pasteur et comme livre de chevet, leur mère leur avait donné non l'Imitation de Jésus-Christ, mais *The Pilgrim's Progress*: ce recul ne faisait que mieux ressortir les traits qui nous étaient communs. Je m'émus de voir Meg et Joe enfilez de pauvres robes en popeline noisette pour se rendre à une matinée où tous les autres enfants étaient vêtus de soie; on leur enseignait, comme à moi, que la culture et la moralité l'emportent sur la richesse; leur modeste foyer avait, comme le mien, un

je ne sais quoi d'exceptionnel. Je m'identifiai passionnément à Jo, l'intellectuelle (*Mémoires* 123).

Like Jo March, Beauvoir became a teacher and a writer. What the young Simone did not (and could not) know as she read the novel is that she would later share another common trait with Jo March: like Louisa May Alcott's intellectual heroine, Simone would face death at a young age when she lost Elisabeth Lacoïn, the person whom she loved the most in the world. Similarly, Jo March lost her sister Beth who died from a weakened heart caused by scarlet fever. The parallel between the losses suffered by Simone and Jo March is striking. Without Elisabeth's death, Beauvoir's literary career would not have become what it is today. According to Moses M. Nagy, "Without Zaza, the literary creation of Simone is hardly imaginable: Zaza's image, like that of a ghost, surfaces in almost every literary attempt of Simone" (1995, 21). The death of Elisabeth at the end of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* can be read allegorically as the death of God and religion for Simone. However, a birth also takes place as Simone becomes an independent woman and an engaged intellectual. The theme of death is significant throughout Beauvoir's works while the word "mort" is the last word of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*. Death, triangular relationships, the Other, and the feminine condition are the core themes that characterize Beauvoir's writing.

### **Zaza's Private Space: *Correspondance et carnets d'Elisabeth Lacoïn***

One cannot effectively discuss the life of Simone de Beauvoir without examining the powerful role and the untimely death of her closest friend Elisabeth Lacoïn. While Beauvoir's name is known world-wide in the academic arena as well as within popular

culture, Elisabeth Lacoïn remains largely unknown to literary scholars. Currently, there are only eleven articles in the database of the Modern Language Association that discuss her life and writings even though her contribution to the literary world is a brilliant collection of letters, poems, and journal entries that were published with the permission of the Lacoïn family in 1991<sup>13</sup> under the title *Zaza: Correspondance et carnets d'Elisabeth Lacoïn 1914-1929*. The work also contains photos of Elisabeth, Simone, and the Lacoïn family. However, the publication of Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* in 1958 had already made Elisabeth Lacoïn known to the world. It is from these two autobiographical sources as well as from various interviews with Elisabeth's siblings that we know as much as we do about this young woman. Thus, the first volume of Beauvoir's lengthy autobiography is considered to be not only the autobiography of the author but biographical in nature since *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* functions as a eulogy or a celebration of the short life of Elisabeth Lacoïn.

Many other female figures that appear throughout Beauvoir's publications seem to be modeled at least in part after Elisabeth. Most notably, the character "Anne" in the fourth tale of *Quand prime le spirituel* (1979) shares a striking resemblance to Beauvoir's childhood friend. Elisabeth's death was indeed the catalyst and the principal motivation for the writing and publication of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* and *Quand prime le spirituel*. Deborah MacKeefe identifies Elisabeth as a mission and a motive for the writing of several of her works. (MacKeefe 205). Beauvoir's friendship with Elisabeth Lacoïn represents a point of origin for many Beauvoirien themes such as death, religion,

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<sup>13</sup> Seuil was the publisher.

social class, and the mother-daughter relationship. An anti-bourgeois discourse is embedded throughout the text as Beauvoir expresses her rage against the milieu that, according to her, claimed the life of her most cherished friend. It is through her writing about Elisabeth's untimely death that Beauvoir is able to actively protest the values, structure, and way of life of the bourgeoisie.

Elisabeth Lacoïn was born in Paris on December 25, 1907. She was the third born in a family of ten children. Her parents were the son and daughter of two sisters<sup>14</sup> and thus germane cousins.<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth died on November 25, 1929, just a month before her twenty-second birthday. Although the exact cause of death remains a mystery, doctors believe that viral encephalitis was the primary cause.<sup>16</sup> When reading the lengthy<sup>17</sup> *Correspondance et Carnets*, one encounters a brilliant, precocious, and loving young woman who is passionate and full of life. The pages of Elisabeth's life-writing relate three love stories<sup>18</sup>, beautiful friendships, and eloquent travel writing in her description and representation of time spent in Berlin from November 10, 1928 until February 3, 1929. Elisabeth was a brilliant student, an intellectual, a beautiful writer, and a musician<sup>19</sup>. She was a loving daughter, a true friend, a devout Catholic, a talented athlete, and an excellent cook. There is a deep devotion to God, religious piety, and mysticism that often seem to rival that of Jeanne d'Arc and Bernadette Soubirous.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The grandmothers are referred to as "Bonne-Maman" and "Grand'Mère" ou "Anmé."

<sup>15</sup> Her mother's maiden name was Lafabrie.

<sup>16</sup> Doctors have also suggested meningitis, some other contagious disease, excess fatigue, and mental anxiety as other possible causes of her death.

<sup>17</sup> The work is 381 pages in length.

<sup>18</sup> With her cousin André Lamoliatte, Hans Miller, and finally with Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth played the piano and the violin.

<sup>20</sup> Bernadette Soubirous is the peasant girl who first saw the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858.

Elisabeth's writing style is sophisticated, precocious, and passionate. When reading Elisabeth's letters and journal entries, one cannot help but think of the canonical writings of Madame de Sévigné, Rousseau, and Chateaubriand, due to her literary style, observations, and attention to detail. Humor and irony are employed throughout her writing in order to critique certain aspects of society or family members. Elisabeth was indeed a young genius with an impressive knowledge of French *lettres* as well as other Western literary traditions. She was so brilliant that she caught the attention of her professor, Robert Garric, who convinced her parents to allow her to begin her *licence* in Classics at the Sorbonne. However, there is a darker side to this published volume. Emotional pain, thoughts of suicide, frustration, exhaustion, and despair are also expressed within the letters and journal entries.

One of the most important aspects of *Correspondance et carnets* has to do with the issues of author intention, publication, and the notion of the intended reader of the fragments that compose the larger work. First and foremost, Lacoïn could not have known that she would die suddenly at the age of twenty-one and that, years later, her family and friends would reunite the fragments and publish them under one title. This fact makes the work even more extraordinary since the reader has the possibility to read and compare all of her writings. As she composed intimate letters to Maurice Merleau-Ponty during the summer and fall of 1929, it is reasonable to assume that, as she carefully crafted each letter, the content was for his eyes only. Similarly, each letter in the *Correspondance et carnets* was written to one individual or to a very small group of

readers.<sup>21</sup> However, now that the letters are united under one title and arranged in chronological order, the end result is a spectacular literary creation, for the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. Another important aspect of the work is the fact that it contains only the letters written by Elisabeth. The letters that she received from friends and family members are not included. The fact that only Elisabeth's voice is contained in *Correspondance et carnets* is significant because she does not share literary space with other writers. In death, she found the private space that she so desperately wanted to have during her life. The work is also intriguing because of what it reveals about members of her family, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Elisabeth's letters and entries in her diary reflect her inner world and how each individual figured into her life.

The work opens with a letter dated June 5, 1914, at which time Elisabeth was only six years old. In this letter that is addressed to her mother and father, Elisabeth thanks her parents for a doll that they had recently given her. She further explains that she gave one of her older dolls to her younger sister Madeleine: "Je vous remercie de la superbe poupée qui a été pour moi. J'en avais une qui était belle alors je l'ai donnée à Lonlon qui en avait une horrible, parce que Marie en a plusieurs et Madeleine les lui casse mais elle en a beaucoup" (*Correspondance* 11). This letter reveals the innocence of Elisabeth's childhood as well as her loving, giving nature, qualities that would define her throughout her life. The last letter of the collection is dated November 11, 1929, just two weeks before Lacoïn's death. The letter is addressed to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>21</sup> Some letters were written to both her parents, for example.

with whom she was madly in love. Elisabeth tells him that she has spent the past week reading *Le Chemin de la croix* by Paul Claudel. She makes a reference to the suffering of Merleau-Ponty's mother. Then she speaks of her own mother, referring to her as "Une mère très naturelle" (*Correspondance* 381). This last comment about her mother was her way of diplomatically explaining her mother's rigidity and strict adherence to bourgeois values.

In this last letter, Elisabeth frantically tries to obtain her independence and happiness by arranging and securing her future with Merleau-Ponty. This time, in contrast to the first letter, *she* is the doll or puppet, and many other social forces and individuals are pulling the strings. At the age of twenty-one, nothing is as simple as the commerce of dolls at the age of six. The collection of journal entries and letters that lie in between the first and last letters reveals how Elisabeth changed from a young girl innocently arranging the future of her dolls to a tormented young woman who is being traded within the social matrix of bourgeois society. It is important to note that the last word in the letter is *l'Amour* with a capital A. The ending of this letter is so appropriate because Elisabeth was a selfless young woman who lived to love others.

### **Daughters of the Bourgeoisie**

At first glance, Simone and Elisabeth appear to have existed within the intricate bourgeois milieu in much the same way. The quotidian life of both girls included many of the traditional bourgeois icons such as a Catholic upbringing, arranged marriages with cousins, and summer holidays spent in the French countryside in family-owned chateaux

and elegant country homes. Both girls grew up in a world of social rituals, dominated by outward appearances and a rigid social protocol. They shared intelligence and a love of books, they attended the same school, they both fell in love with cousins<sup>22</sup> during their teenage years. Simone spent time at La Grillère<sup>23</sup> and at Meyrignac<sup>24</sup>, while "Zaza"<sup>25</sup> spent her summers at Haubardin.<sup>26</sup> Deborah Mackeefe elucidates the nature of the bourgeoisie in the lives of Simone and Zaza:

Both the Mabilles and the de Beauvoirs share certain characteristics. They are Parisian, Catholic and bourgeois. Yet, they are very different in other respects. The de Beauvoirs are "hors classe"; their daughters will have no dowries. The Mabilles plan to marry their daughters in traditionally arranged ways, complete with dowries. Simone and Zaza differ in more than just personality. Simone has lost her faith in God, while Zaza has retained hers. Simone's family obligations are limited and her studies encouraged, while Zaza's family obligations are overwhelming and her studies discouraged (212).

As she approached her late teen years, Elisabeth was much more limited in the range of books that her parents allowed her to read while the adolescent Simone had relatively free access to more "scandalous" literary works.<sup>27</sup> In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* Beauvoir describes her relationship with Elisabeth: "Ma seule véritable amie demeurait Zaza. Sa mère, hélas! Commençait à me regarder d'un mauvais oeil. C'était sous mon influence que Zaza préférait ses études à la vie domestique et je lui prêtais des livres scandaleux" (*Mémoires* 332). In addition, Elisabeth suffered from a plethora of social

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques and André

<sup>23</sup> Also located in the Limousin region, about 10 miles from Meyrignac, the Château de la Grillère was the home of Georges de Beauvoir's older sister Hélène. Each summer the Beauvoirs spent at least a few days vacationing at La Grillère.

<sup>24</sup> Located in the Limousin region, her paternal grandfather's country estate.

<sup>25</sup> "Zaza" is Elisabeth's nickname, especially within her family.

<sup>26</sup> Located in the Landes.

<sup>27</sup> In *Mémoires* (page 152) she states that the literary works of " Bourget, Alphonse Daudet, Marcel Prévost, Maupassant, les Goncourt" completed her sexual education.

restrictions imposed by her mother which resulted in her isolation from her closest friends. Even their summer vacations were much different. While vacationing at Meyrignac and La Grillère, Simone had much personal freedom and time to herself. Elisabeth, on the other hand, had to participate in a flurry of lunches, picnics, dances, and many other social gatherings. In a letter to Simone dated August 4, 1927, Elisabeth expressed the extent of her mental anguish after her parents forced her to break off her relationship with her cousin André due to a long-standing family quarrel: "En janvier 1926, lorsqu'on m'a obligée à rompre avec André, j'ai tant souffert que plusieurs fois j'ai été à deux doigts du suicide. Je me souviens d'un soir où, voyant le métro arriver, j'ai failli passer dessous" (*Correspondance* 90). This exact passage from Elisabeth's letter appears in Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (345). Similarly, in her personal diary, Elisabeth wrote, "Au milieu de mes parents et de mes amis, je me sens abandonnée, mes gestes ne correspondent pas à mes désirs, ni mes paroles à mes pensées, et je ne me sens pas vivre, mais je crois jouer un rôle dans une pièce mal faite" (*Correspondance* 69). These passages reflect the extent of Elisabeth's suffering and her desire to be in control of her own life and future.

As time passed, Madame Lacoïn continued to limit Elisabeth's personal freedom, refusing to allow her daughter to continue her education at the Sorbonne. This was particularly difficult since she and her siblings had enjoyed a relatively free and relaxed childhood. After forbidding Elisabeth to socialize with her cousin André, the group of young intellectuals at the Sorbonne soon became the next social circle eliminated by Madame Lacoïn. In addition, Simone de Beauvoir was no longer invited to the family's

summer chateau at Gagnepan. Elisabeth knew that an arranged marriage was on the horizon. In her journal entry dated June 18, 1929, she complained about her mother's attempts to find her a suitable husband: "Maman me reparle du petit marchand d'allumettes; je suis dans un état d'esprit tel que cela me paraît grotesque" (*Correspondance* 283). Simone and Madame Lacoïn became social rivals, both fighting for the right to determine Elisabeth's future. In the eyes of Simone, Madame Lacoïn was the incarnation of the Catholic church, the traditional family, and the bourgeoisie. By "going to war" with Madame Lacoïn, Simone was simultaneously battling the pillars of society that she despised. In this way, a tug-of-war or a system of triangulation was produced within the Simone--Elisabeth--Madame Lacoïn struggle. This mother-child struggle is also seen in *Quand prime le spirituel* through the relationship between Anne and her mother.

The increasing obligations and the stress of the daily demands of her bourgeois milieu psychologically tormented Elisabeth. Beauvoir describes with horror how her friend cut her foot with an axe one summer in order to escape her responsibilities and to have some time to herself. This episode is also represented in *Quand prime le spirituel* when Anne splits her foot with an axe in order to avoid having to spend a weekend at another family's country estate. In another letter to Simone on September 30, 1928 Elisabeth wrote:

Maman a été absolument révoltée par une proposition que je trouvais pourtant si naturelle, elle a déclaré qu'elle n'admettait pas ces mœurs de Sorbonne et que je n'irais pas à un tennis organisé par une petite étudiante de vingt ans retrouver des jeunes gens dont elle ne connaissait même pas les familles (*Correspondance* 137).

In a letter to Geneviève de Neuville on October 11, 1929, Lacoïn told her friend that "j'espère une rencontre qui me rendra ma liberté d'esprit en me débarrassant des fantômes dont je me tourmente" (*Correspondance* 373). Her final letter to Simone was written on November 4, 1929, just three weeks before her death. In the letter she talked of plans to meet Simone and her friends from the Sorbonne at a bar the following Saturday. She states that "pour ma part, je souhaite vivement de faire le plus tôt possible la connaissance de Sartre, la lettre que vous m'avez lue m'a plu infiniment" (*Correspondance* 380). She ends the letter with "je pense toujours à vous et je vous aime de tout mon cœur" (*Correspondance* 381). These are the last words that she ever wrote to Simone.

### **Zaza Travels To Berlin**

Although Elisabeth was allowed to begin her *licence* in Classics, her parents refused to allow her to continue to the next level--the *diplôme d'études supérieures*. Fearing that her daughter was becoming too closely aligned with students at the Sorbonne, Madame Lacoïn sent Elisabeth away to Germany in November of 1928, hoping that upon her return, she would have forgotten about her friends at the Sorbonne, and would agree to enter into an arranged marriage. On October 6, 1928, Elisabeth wrote, "J'éprouve une angoisse très grande à la pensée de rompre toutes mes obligations, de partir pour trois mois et de quitter Paris où je comptais avoir cet hiver" (*Correspondance* 145). Despite her desire to stay in Paris, Elisabeth was forced by her parents to move to Berlin.

During her three months in Berlin, Elisabeth wrote in her diary and sent letters to friends and family members in France. Within these written narratives of Berlin, Zaza recorded her thoughts and impressions of daily life in the city. As an outsider, her written accounts reveal her unique position as an observer of daily life. When writing about women's travel writing, Sara Steinert Borella explains that "the traveler lives a very particular experience of place and space: always far from home, the traveler must define and redefine her notion of self in relation to her new surroundings" (26). With her newly-discovered freedom in Berlin, Elisabeth flourished. She enrolled at the university and was one of only three French students studying there. She started writing a novel and also translated a short story by Thomas Mann while working as a tutor giving private French lessons. Her interest in music was rekindled with a new passion. In addition, she befriended a young German named Hans Miller. While their relationship began as a mere friendship, it became clear to Madame Lacoïn that Hans Miller was in love with her daughter. Ironically, Elisabeth had been sent away to Germany to break ties with the group from the Sorbonne. At one point, Madame Lacoïn asked Elisabeth to allow her father, who understood German, to read the letters that she had received from Miller.<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth refused to allow her father to invade her private epistolary space by reading her correspondence with Miller. This incident is an example of how her knowledge of the German language, and thus her education, served as at least a partial barrier to Madame Lacoïn's prying eyes. Her refusal also implies the level of emotional intimacy she shared with Miller.

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<sup>28</sup> The letters written to and received from Hans Miller were in German.

In Berlin Elisabeth found her own private space and personal freedom by working, attending the university, and making new friends. It is in Berlin that she found her own sense of identity beyond the social arena of the Lacoïn family heritage and the bourgeoisie. For the first time in her life, she lived alone, earned her own money, and distanced herself mentally and geographically from the oppression of her family. Ironically, in her attempt to further control and assert her power over her daughter, Madame Lacoïn had sent her daughter to a place where she would find her own personal space and freedom. In a letter to Simone dated January 17, 1929, Elisabeth expressed her fear of returning to the pressures of her family's milieu:

Je vous avoue que je suis effrayée de reprendre mon existence d'il y a trois mois. Le très respectable formalisme dont vivent la plupart des gens de 'notre milieu' m'est devenu insupportable, d'autant plus insupportable que je me rappelle l'époque pas bien lointaine où, sans le savoir, j'en étais encore pénétrée et que je crains en rentrant dans le cadre de n'en reprendre l'esprit (*Correspondance* 208).

### **Broken Engagement: Zaza and Merleau-Ponty**

Upon her return from Berlin, Elisabeth fell in love with a young philosophy student at the Sorbonne named Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Simone was falling in love with Jean-Paul Sartre. Moses M. Nagy explains that "Merleau-Ponty stepped into the life of Zaza at a time she was experiencing changes, breaks, and separations" (1995, 103). In addition to intelligence and education, Maurice and Elisabeth both shared a love of literature and faith in God. Unlike Sartre and Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty was Catholic and very religious. However, both of their mothers were viewed by the young couple as obstacles to their love and eventual marriage. When

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<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty is referred to as "Pradelle" in Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*.

Elisabeth finally told her mother about the nature of their relationship, Madame Lacoïn forbade her daughter to see Merleau-Ponty again. She feared for her daughter's future and did not want her socializing with the group of students at the Sorbonne. In a letter to her friend Geneviève de Neuville dated August 27, 1929, Elisabeth expressed the extent of her anguish after being forbidden by her mother to see or to correspond with Merleau-Ponty: "Il n'a fallu toute la force puisée dans mon pèlerinage à Lourdes pour accepter de n'avoir plus aucun rapport ni épistolaire ni autre cette année avec P., alors que c'est sans doute la dernière qu'il passe à Paris" (*Correspondance* 357).

On July 20, 1929, Elisabeth received an express letter (*pneumatique*) from Merleau-Ponty in which he declared his love. She wrote to Simone de Beauvoir, "Le mot qu'il me fallait est arrivé, c'est de joie maintenant que je suis étouffée. Il faut bien que je vous le dise avant de quitter Paris" (*Correspondance* 307). However, on November 11, 1929, Elisabeth received another *pneumatique* from Merleau-Ponty in which he stated that despite the ring that he had given to her earlier, they were no longer engaged. The reason for the broken engagement is not revealed in *Correspondance et carnets*, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, or *Quand prime le spirituel*. According to Francis and Gontier's detailed account of the events that lead to the broken engagement, after the publication of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* one of Elisabeth's sisters told Beauvoir the truth of what had occurred between the two families. The Lacoïn family was not originally opposed to Maurice Merleau-Ponty marrying their daughter. Thus, they began to investigate his family and his background, a procedure which was routine for their milieu. Unfortunately the inquiry revealed that "Madame Merleau-Ponty was the

recognized mistress of a University Professor and her two youngest children were the result of a double adultery" (Francis and Gontier 87). Since Maurice's birth was viewed as a sin, a marriage between Maurice and Elisabeth would not be allowed by the Lacoins. Furthermore, Maurice learned that he was an illegitimate child from Monsieur Lacoin himself, and he agreed to give up his relationship and engagement to Elisabeth in order to keep the family secret (Francis and Gontier 87). Although Elisabeth learned the truth about Merleau-Ponty's illegitimate birth, she never wrote about it in her diary or in any known letters.<sup>30</sup> Rather, she wrote about the details of his illegitimacy in a small notebook that her sister Françoise found in one of Elisabeth's aprons more than thirty years after her death (Lacoste 94). The existence of this small notebook is proof that there are some truths and realities that are too private and / or too painful to include even in one's own *journal intime*. Elisabeth did feel compelled to write about the tragic circumstances surrounding Merleau-Ponty's birth, but to record these events, she chose a small, insignificant notebook entirely separate from her standard journal.

### **Zaza's Death**

On the night of November 13, 1929, Elisabeth was rushed to the hospital delirious with a fever. She died on November 25, 1929, and doctors have never identified the precise cause of her death. Stress, physical exhaustion, a mental illness, viral encephalitis, and meningitis have all been proposed as potential causes. According to Nagy, "The fall of Zaza also resembles that of an Angel, not that she was guilty of revolt

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<sup>30</sup> She learned the truth from her family on November 2, 1929.

against God or men; her fall awakens our pity because she led the life of an innocent" (1995, 101). Ironically, in a letter written to H el ene de Beauvoir on November 10, just two weeks before her death, she tells Simone's sister that she would be delighted to go swimming with her despite the high level of bacteria and germs in the pool: "Je serais enchant ee d'aller   la piscine de la Butte-aux-Cailles avec vous, quand m eme il y aurait des tas de microbes, car je me fiche des microbes" (*Correspondance* 381). This reference to dangerous virus and bacteria foreshadow her death which would occur at the end of the month.

### **Autobiographical Deaths and (Re)birth(s): *Quand prime le spirituel***

For Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth's death left a wound that never healed. Death is one of the major themes of Beauvoir's autobiographical texts as well as many other of her works. This friendship was one of the most significant of Beauvoir's life, since it is this relationship as well as Elisabeth's death that inspired Beauvoir to become a writer. Many of her publications resuscitate the memory and life of Elisabeth. As Beauvoir writes and re-writes her best friend within literary space, a healing of the autobiographer takes place as life-writing becomes a space of advocacy, vindication, and personal *engagement*. In this sense, Elisabeth is brought back to life and made immortal as she becomes canonized in literature. Like Ophelia, Elisabeth will always exist in literary space as a result of Beauvoir's canonization of her story within her own autobiography.

There are many other symbolic deaths that take place throughout the first volume of Beauvoir's autobiography. As Susan Bainbrigge explains, "In the *M emoires*, the

symbolic or actual deaths of two maidens can be traced" (126). At the end of the memoirs, Beauvoir is no longer a child; she is a grown, adult woman. In addition to the death of Elisabeth, she has experienced the loss of the innocence of childhood as well as her own rebirth as a strong, independent, young woman who has broken away from both parents. By turning away from the Catholic Church, she symbolically and psychologically broke away from her mother. Similarly, by condemning the bourgeoisie, she separated herself from the ideals of her father whereas Elisabeth was never fully able to break away from her parents. Her death at the end of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* as well as Anne's death in *Quand prime le spirituel* represent Beauvoir's attempt to represent this personal tragedy in literary space.

Beauvoir's initial attempt to write about Elisabeth's death is represented in the short story entitled "Anne" in *Quand prime le spirituel*, which was written between 1935-1937 but not formally published until 1979. Liliane Lazar describes the collection of stories as a work that "helps us understand the bond which exists between novelist and autobiographer" (29). While the loss of a loved one is always painful for friends and family members of the deceased, Elisabeth's death was especially troubling for all who knew her because she died at a time when her life was just beginning, suddenly and unexpectedly, with the exact cause of her death still unknown. According to Deborah MacKeefe, in this work of autobiographical fiction, "one can see to what extent Simone must have perceived herself as Zaza's rescuer" (214). Although we will never know exactly what Simone felt and experienced when she lost her best friend, the narrative of "Anne" gives the reader an important degree of insight into her state of mind.

*Quand prime le spirituel* is a collection of five short stories, each bearing the name of a specific female protagonist. Even though there are links between the stories, each tale can be read independently and out of order. In the chapter entitled "Anne" Beauvoir retells the last few month's of Elisabeth's life within the literary framework of autobiographical fiction. Anne, like Elisabeth Lacoïn, is a young woman trying to find her voice and space in a family and in a society that leave her few options. According to Liliane Lazar, "Anne's inability to liberate herself either from her tyrannical mother or from the influence of the bourgeois society into which she was born is conveyed partially by the fact that nowhere does she appear as the narrator of the story" (31). In fact, the only place where Anne is the narrator of her own life is within the private letters that she wrote to Pascal<sup>31</sup>. Genevieve Shepherd describes Anne's predicament in the following manner:

In Anne, Beauvoir portrays the demands of the dutiful superego on the ego as those of an unbearably repressive maternal influence. The excessive societal and religious ideals imposed on the heroine, who is torn between her desires and her duties, leads her into a fatal neurosis for which, it could be speculated, her mother is fundamentally responsible (65).

The story opens with a first-person narrative that is Madame Vignon's moving prayer to God. That monologue expresses her fear of letters and thus of the epistolary form of writing:

Je suis si inquiète, si incertaine: il n'y a pas de doute, c'est une écriture d'homme, sûrement un de ces garçons de la Sorbonne, aucun jeune homme de notre milieu ne se permettrait d'écrire à une de mes filles; la troisième lettre depuis le début des vacances, je me demande si elle lui répond, on ne la voit jamais écrire (*Quand prime* 133).

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<sup>31</sup> The character "Pascal" was inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Madame Vignon is outraged by this epistolary correspondence between Pascal and Anne because the relationship was not arranged or approved by either family. Furthermore, Madame Vignon is irate due to the fact that she has been excluded from this aspect of Anne's life, for she believes that she has a fundamental right to read her daughter's letters. In this way, the themes of letter writing and correspondence are at the center of the narrative, for the letters represent Anne's private epistolary space which her mother desperately wants to transgress.

It is through this critique of Madame Vignon's actions and treatment towards her daughter that Beauvoir attacks the mother / daughter relationship as well as the structure and essence of bourgeois society. Anne's best friend Chantal is aware of Madame Vignon's cruelty, and as a result, Chantal views herself as Anne's rescuer. As Deborah Mackeeffe notes,

Mme. Vignon sees Chantal as the enemy in her fight to preserve her daughter's obedience, and Chantal willingly accepts this role. Chantal's intellect, her love of books, and her desire to be a writer are juxtaposed to Madame Vignon's fear of books, letters, and writing. She is convinced of the validity and importance of her attempt to save Anne (214).

In this way a system of triangulation is established that consists of a struggle between Madame Vignon, Anne, and Chantal. Anne's lack of personal freedom is enhanced by the fact that she is perpetually caught in triangular relationships of power. While the individuals in the triangle may vary slightly (Madame Vignon--Anne--Pascal, or Madame Vignon--Anne--Chantal), Anne is always being pulled in opposite directions by those she loves the most. All of her choices for a future are in direct conflict with one another: If she follows her mother's wishes she will be bound to God, Catholicism, and the

bourgeoisie. If she marries the young philosopher Pascal, she will be forced to go against her family. Finally, Chantal's wants her friend to embrace a life free from her parents, one that privileges atheism and a bohemian, intellectual life-style.

In her conversation with God, Madame Vignon expresses her frustration with Chantal: "Toutes les difficultés sont venues de cette petite intellectuelle prétentieuse; une fille qui traîne dans les cafés avec des hommes, qui n'a pas de famille, qui ne croit ni à Dieu ni à diable, une déclassée; c'est chez elle qu'Anne l'a connu" (*Quand prime* 135). She believes that Chantal and the group of young intellectuals at the Sorbonne pose a great danger to her daughter's traditional values and bourgeois upbringing. In addition to fearing her daughter's letter writing, Madame Vignon is afraid of the content of the novels that her daughter is reading. She attempts to practice a form of censorship as she forbids her daughter to read some of them. When she confronts her about them, it is clear that she has entered the private space of her daughter's bedroom and perused the works of literature on her shelves. Thus, even Anne's bedroom is not a private space that she can call her own. Madame Vignon expresses her dislike for the scandalous volumes and authors that she found in her daughter's collection: "Je hais ces esprits morbides et contournés, avoir le front de se dire catholique quand on écrit sur la famille de pareilles horreurs! à quelle époque vivons-nous! Ces faux docteurs, ces faux prophètes; Robert aurait dû la surveiller davantage" (*Quand prime* 136). Later, when speaking to her daughter, she states, "Je souffre, crois-le-bien, de te sentir souillée par des lectures malsaines, par la fréquentation de garçons sans scrupules, de femmes orgueilleuses et sans pudeur. Dieu sait à présent où tu en es" (*Quand prime* 144). Anne finds a source of

personal agency by reading works of literature that her mother does not approve of. Similarly, she resists her mother through her own form of censorship when she prevents her mother from reading her letters to and from Pascal.

After Anne's death and funeral, Madame Vignon is finally in possession of Anne's letters that she so desperately wanted to read at the beginning of the tale. However, as the narrator tells us, "Elle avait classé les papiers d'Anne mais elle n'avait pas encore eu la force de les lire jusqu'au bout; c'était une pénible tâche" (*Quand prime* 187). The reader cannot help but recall the beginning of the narrative, the mother's prayer to God in which she is determined to read the correspondence. Now that she is deprived of her daughter, she no longer wants to read the details of this epistolary exchange. However, the narrative does make reference to the desire to publish Elisabeth's letters and journal entries; the tale "Anne" announces the future publication of *Zaza: Correspondance et carnets d'Elisabeth Lacoïn 1914-1929* when the narrator states that "Mme Vignon décida de faire publier un opuscule à la mémoire de sa fille. Un très simple petit memento: un portrait d'Anne, quelques extraits de ses carnets intimes et de ses prières préférées" (*Quand prime* 187). Ironically, Beauvoir pushes Madame Vignon herself into publishing Anne's work, thus canonizing her daughter within literary space. Symbolically, she is allowing her to join the same literary arena of writers and authors that she forbade her to read during her life. This gesture is a paradox for a woman who originally harbored such a fear of books and writing. Thus, there is evidence that in the aftermath of Anne's death, Madame Vignon has realized her errors in judgment, and that she recognizes her mistreatment of her daughter.

Although *Quand prime le spirituel* does not contain any actual photos, there is a reference to a photograph at the end of "Anne." After Anne's death, Madame Vignon is surrounded not only by Anne's letters but also by photos. At this point in the narrative, the letters, journals and photos are all that remain of her daughter. Many of these photos were published in *Correspondance et carnets* in 1991. In addition, we learn through the narrator that Chantal and Pascal have traveled to Uzerche to visit Anne's grave. When they stop to pay their respects to Anne's family, Madame Vignon returns the packets of letters that the two young philosophy students had written to her daughter. Chantal and Pascal take the packets of letters back from Madame Vignon and exchange them with each other. So even after her death, Anne's letters continue to circulate. While the letters are exchanged, Chantal expresses a desire to write a volume that would honor Anne's life: "Comme je voudrais pouvoir la faire revivre; il faudrait tout un livre pour la montrer telle que vraiment elle était, un être de chair et de flamme; la belle héroïne claire et mystérieuse avec son rire ingénu, son cœur passionné" (*Quand prime* 191). The volume referred to by Chantal is five hundred pages in length; Beauvoir started writing it in 1956, and published it in 1958 under the title *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*.

### ***Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter***

One cannot help but wonder what the process of writing this first volume of her five hundred page autobiography was like for the middle-aged Simone de Beauvoir as she resuscitated the memory of Elisabeth Lacoïn. While Beauvoir herself is the central subject of *La force de l'âge* and *La force des choses*, in the first volume of *Mémoires*

*d'une jeune fille rangée*, she shares auto(biographical) space with her best friend. This may be why the literary voice of this first volume possesses a tenderness and a warmth that are absent in later autobiographical publications. By making Zaza the protagonist of her own autobiography, Beauvoir places her childhood friend in the eternal of literary space and as a result, her writing is haunted by the memory of Zaza's life and tragic death. The act of publishing this volume in 1958 was a vindication for Beauvoir since she made public the life and death of her best friend. In addition to sharing Elisabeth's story with a public of readers, she criticized the Lacoïn family and the bourgeoisie.

*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* has had a great impact on so many readers world-wide because of the wide variety of everyday issues that are addressed so candidly by Beauvoir. Going to school, learning to read, navigating the awkwardness of puberty, stress in the home, falling in love, questioning one's faith--these are just a few of the personal struggles that Beauvoir shares with her readers as she writes about subjects and realities that virtually everyone can understand and relate to. When describing Beauvoir's approach to autobiography, Deborah MacKeefe states that she is "self-analytical, self-critical, and self-reproachful in her attempt to relate her early life honestly. Her voice also registers on the level of self-affirmation, almost to the point of self-aggrandizement" (205). The book is divided into four parts that Terry Keefe identifies in the following manner: Part I represents Simone's childhood before she met Elisabeth Lacoïn; Part II presents the reader with the rest of Simone's *scolarité* during which Elisabeth played an increasingly important role; in Part III Simone is earning her *licence*, and Part IV is a detailed account of the events leading up to Elisabeth's death from 1928-1929 (31).

In the opening paragraph of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, Beauvoir makes reference to a photo taken in 1909 in order to provide the reader with a visual image of her family at a precise moment in time: "Sur les photos de famille prises l'été suivant, on voit de jeunes dames en robes longues, aux chapeaux empanachés de plumes d'autruche, des messieurs coiffés de canotiers et de panamas qui sourient à un bébé" (*Mémoires* 9). When writing autobiographically, authors will commonly rely on both linguistic and visual artifacts, and consult family photos, letters, and diaries in order to remember and piece together past events. Although the actual photo itself is not present within the work, Beauvoir attempts to provide the reader with a "picture-perfect" image of her family during the Belle Epoque. The rhetoric of the photo tells of a happy childhood during which the young Simone felt safe, loved, and very special. Her use of that specific artifact as a point of departure is also an early signal of the important link between life-writing and visual images. The twentieth century witnessed the development of the relationship between written texts, photos and film. Photography or the inclusion of a photo in a text serves as an intermediate step between the written text and film, as Chapter 4 will show in examining in detail the role of life-writing, female filmmakers, and the visual imagery of the motion picture screen.

Born in Paris on January 9, 1908, to Françoise Brasseur and Georges de Beauvoir, Simone<sup>32</sup> de Beauvoir's early life is characterized by family wealth and prestige spanning several generations; as her text reminds us, during the Belle Epoque, affluence and status were synonymous with the name de Beauvoir. The first volume of her autobiography

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<sup>32</sup> Her full name is Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir.

reveals a happy childhood characterized by a staunch Catholic upbringing, a milieu of family fortunes, arranged marriages, and prestigious private schools. Her father, Georges, came from a family of Parisian aristocrats, and as a result, social class was an important feature of Beauvoir's childhood. When describing her father's attitude toward social class Beauvoir states:

L'insolite vocation de mon père s'explique je crois, par son statut social. Son nom, certaines relations familiales, des camaraderies d'enfance, des amitiés de jeune homme le convainquirent qu'il appartenait à l'aristocratie; il en adopta les valeurs. Il appréciait les gestes élégants, les jolis sentiments, la désinvolture, l'allure, le panache, la frivolité, l'ironie (*Mémoires* 47).

Although Georges de Beauvoir was trained as a lawyer, his real passion was for literature and the theatre. A self-proclaimed agnostic, he did not believe that married men had to practice monogamy, in sharp contrast to Simone's convent-educated mother who was horrified by intimate topics such as sexuality, the body, nudity, or menstruation. Indeed Beauvoir describes her mother as cold, distant, and timid: "Elle associa toujours étroitement l'idée de chair à celle de péché" (*Mémoires* 54).

Dorothy Kaufmann describes Madame de Beauvoir's attitude towards her husband's infidelity: "Completely dependent on her husband, she resigned herself to his numerous trivial affairs as part of the inevitable double standard of marriage. She accepted without question her prescribed duties as wife and mother, renouncing any self-expression outside those roles (126). Despite her horror of the body and sexuality, Françoise de Beauvoir was responsible for shaping her daughter's morals and values, her sense of right and wrong, and her deep faith in God and Catholicism. As Marilyn Yalom explains, "Simone's sense of identity was grafted upon the figure of her mother.

Resembling her physically, following her example in matters of faith and deportment, she looked to her mother for approbation" (77). While her mother was preoccupied with her daughter's religious and moral education, her father encouraged his daughter's intellectual formation.

When speaking of Beauvoir's childhood, Lisa Appignanesi states that she "was brought up with a conventional set of bourgeois values which was at once monolithic and incoherent; these values permitted her mother's convent morality to coexist with her father's nationalism" (15). Although the family was originally considered to be part of the elite *bourgeoisie*, the Beauvoirs soon found themselves pushed to a marginal status within their social class. Even before the first World War, they did not enjoy many of the privileges of other bourgeois families: first and foremost, they had only one maid, and their apartment on the Boulevard Montparnasse that overlooked the famous Rotonde café was much smaller than those Françoise and Georges occupied during their respective childhoods. Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre and the children of many other wealthy families, the young Simone did not have a private tutor or a governess. Rather, her father enrolled her in the *Cours Adeline Désir*, a Catholic girls' school with a mostly bourgeois clientele. While the school did possess an air of prestige, it was certainly no match for the reputable *Couvent des Oiseaux* which her mother attended.<sup>33</sup>

Her father's interests in theatre pushed the family even farther away from the traditional bourgeois life. Furthermore, he professed that writers were among the most

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<sup>33</sup>In their comprehensive biography entitled *Simone de Beauvoir, a Life a Love Story*, Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier emphasize the exclusivity of the Couvent des Oiseaux: The institution was reserved only for the aristocracy and the upper middle class and was considered one of the best in France (7).

elite individuals of society; more prestigious than philosophers, scholars and professors (Appignanesi 17), they were tantamount to royalty and possessed god-like qualities. This attitude greatly influenced Simone's desire to become a writer: "Le savant, l'artiste, l'écrivain, le penseur créaient un autre monde, lumineux et joyeux, où tout avait sa raison d'être. C'était là que je voulais passer mes jours" (*Mémoires* 196). On a more concrete level, writing became a way for Beauvoir to earn a living, and thus achieve financial independence.

Gustave Brasseur, Simone de Beauvoir's maternal grandfather, embroiled the family in a financial scandal that resulted in bankruptcy, imprisonment, and the loss of the family fortune. As a result, her mother's dowry was never fully paid. In the period following WWI the family found itself in a state of poverty after the shoe factory run by Georges de Beauvoir and Gustave Brasseur fell into financial ruin. The aggregate of these events drove the family away from their comfortable bourgeois lifestyle. When describing the family's socioeconomic trajectory, Francis and Gontier state that "the Combination of Gustave Brasseur's bankruptcy and Georges de Beauvoir's passion for the theatre slowly pushed this bourgeois family out of the mainstream and onto the fringe" (17).

Despite the Beauvoirs' increased poverty, the family was still ideologically rooted in the bourgeoisie. In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* Beauvoir describes her father's attitude towards social class: "Il n'estimait pas que la qualité d'un homme se mesurât à son compte en banque; il se moquait volontiers des 'nouveaux riches.' L'élite se définissait selon lui par l'intelligence, la culture, une orthographe correcte, une bonne

éducation, des idées saines" (*Mémoires* 180). This description of her father's attitude towards social class emphasizes the fact that the bourgeoisie was, above all, a way of viewing the self in relation to others. Wealth and financial power represent only one small component of what it means to be bourgeois. Ironically, the Beauvoirs' "fringe" or marginal status vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie served as the social catalyst that shaped the career path of Simone de Beauvoir. Even at a young age, she did not share the same attitudes as other bourgeois children. During summer vacations at Meyrignac she was horrified by the way that her cousins treated the servants and the members of the working class. Most notably, she recalls that her cousin refused to speak to those determined to be inferior to or outside of the bourgeoisie (servants, gardeners, delivery people), claiming that "c'est à eux de me saluer les premiers" (*Mémoires* 180). It is these seemingly insignificant differences in class awareness and mentality that distinguished Simone from her peers.

Simone met Elisabeth at the age of ten when both girls were enrolled at the *Cours Adeline Désir* where Simone had been a student since the age of five. Elisabeth was precocious, confident, and Simone's intellectual equal. As a result, the young Simone was instantly drawn to this new girl whom she found to be captivating, unique and full of life. Francis and Gontier describe the qualities that made Elisabeth so appealing to Simone:

With her short hair and her boyish look, Elisabeth's ease and casualness surprised Simone. *Zaza*, as she was called, did cartwheels and splits, hung upside down from branches, rode horseback, played tennis. She was allowed to go shopping alone. She had been to Italy, she read poems Simone was forbidden to read, and she caused a scandal at school by

writing that she preferred the rebel Alceste to the socially acceptable Philinte, and Napoléon to Pasteur (39).

Simone was instantly fascinated by her new friend. In her autobiography she describes her admiration for Elisabeth: "En Zaza j'entrevois une présence, jaillissante comme une source, robuste comme un bloc de marbre, aussi fermement dessinée qu'un portrait de Dürer" (*Mémoires* 157). As her best friend, Elisabeth became so central in Simone's life that she wrote, "J'aurais perdu le goût de vivre si on n'avait séparée de Zaza" (*Mémoires* 170).

### **"J'avais payé ma liberté de sa mort"**

When Simone and Elisabeth reached their late teen years, the Beauvoirs were much more cavalier than the Lacoins in regards to their daughter's circle of almost all-male friends at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, which included Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Georges Politzer, Paul Nizan, Jean Guéhenno, Maurice de Gandillac, Robert Garric,<sup>34</sup> Claude Levi Strauss, and René Maheu. Although they could not have known it at the time, these young intellectuals would later, at the end of WWII, establish and write for a publication called *Les Temps Modernes*,<sup>35</sup> which would be one of the core voices of leftist thought and discourse in the post-war era. Since neither Simone nor her younger sister Hélène would have a dowry, an arranged marriage was out of the question. The combination of these elements paved the way to

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Garric was Simone's and Elisabeth's professor at the Sorbonne and the founder of a movement of social welfare groups in France.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond Aron and Albert Camus were also founders. The first issue was published on October 15, 1945.

Beauvoir's non-traditional lifestyle as a writer, philosopher, and intellectual. In other words, Simone was able to obtain a room of her own outside of the family *foyer* while Elisabeth was not so fortunate.

It is this difference in social freedom that Beauvoir is referring to in one of the most famous lines of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* in which she describes the void separating her from Elisabeth: "Ensemble nous avons lutté contre le destin fangeux qui nous guettait et j'ai pensé longtemps que j'avais payé ma liberté de sa mort" (*Mémoires* 503). Guillemine de Lacoste explains that the bourgeoisie is characterized by conventionality, traditions, orthodoxy, and authoritarianism:

Zaza's family was certainly very conventional in a number of ways. First of all, they were strict followers of the bourgeois/patriarchal model of complementarity and asymmetry in the roles assigned man and woman. Man's role was to forge for himself as interesting a life as possible in the world in order to support his family as amply as possible, if not to change the world. Woman's role was one of action and devotion as wife, mother, and homemaker (1992, 87).

Due to her family's poverty, Simone was able to escape much of the pressure of the bourgeoisie. Elisabeth, however, was not as fortunate.

Although Simone and Elisabeth shared intelligence, and a love of books and writing, religion represented a point of contention and difference between the two girls once they reached adolescence. Simone was very pious as a child but lost her faith at the age of fifteen. In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* she gives a detailed account of her psychological and spiritual transformation. As a child Simone was extremely pious:

D'année en année, ma piété en se fortifiant s'épurait et je dédaignais les fadeurs de la morale au profit de la mystique. Je priais, je méditais, j'essayais de rendre sensible à mon cœur la présence divine. Vers douze ans, j'inventai des mortifications: enfermée dans les cabinets--mon seul

refuge--je me frottais au sang avec une pierre ponce, je me fustigeais avec la chaînette d'or que je portais à mon cou (*Mémoires* 186).

One evening while at Meyrignac, Simone realized that she no longer believed in God. From this day on, writers and intellectuals became a substitute for God and religion while works of literature and philosophy became her Bible. Simone began to consider the fact that her father and many famous writers and intellectuals were non-believers. Furthermore, religious piety seemed to be a gendered reality: "Mon père ne croyait pas: les plus grands écrivains, les meilleurs penseurs partageaient son scepticisme; dans l'ensemble, c'était surtout les femmes qui allaient à l'église" (*Mémoires* 189). After her loss of faith, she kept her secret, fearing the loss of her mother's love and Elisabeth's friendship. She continued to go to mass and to take communion, both of which caused her increasing anxiety: "Je savais que, selon les croyants, je commettais un sacrilège. En cachant mon crime, je le multipliais" (*Mémoires* 193).

In addition to religious faith, *scolarité* was another important difference separating Simone and Elisabeth. Monsieur Lacoïn, unlike Monsieur de Beauvoir, was opposed to the idea of his daughters receiving an education beyond the baccalaureate. Both her mother and father viewed Elisabeth's friendship with the students at the Sorbonne as a threat to her future. Unlike her best friend, her family filiations forced her to all but cut off her intellectual affiliation with those students, while Simone was allowed to continue her education, eventually earning the prestigious *agrégation* in philosophy. On the other hand, reading was always at the center of Beauvoir's world. When she reached adolescence, she began to view books as an escape and a way to distance herself from her faith, her social class, and her parents. Reading works of

literature and philosophy exposed her to new ideas and beliefs that were different from those of her parents. Throughout *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* and other autobiographical works, she provides a detailed account of what she was reading as well as her critique of and reaction to each text. As a child and a young woman, Simone defined herself by the books that she read. By reading texts unknown to her parents, she was able to break away from their parental control. As she reached her late teen years, Simone achieved freedom and independence from her mother and father who no longer envisioned an arranged marriage for either of their daughters. She earned her *licence*, and found a true room of her own when she rented her first apartment. Through her teaching position at the Institute Sainte-Marie she was able to support herself financially.

With her new independence, the world became her oyster. Simone went out alone and frequented the bars and cafés of the Left Bank. "Peu à peu je m'enhardis. Je me laissai accoster dans les rues, j'allai boire au bistrot avec des inconnus. Un soir, je montai dans une automobile qui m'avait suivie le long des grands boulevards" (*Mémoires* 379). A regular at the cafés and bars of Paris' left bank, Simone drank, smoked and danced with unknown men. When speaking of Beauvoir's new relationship with the night life of Paris Lisa Appignanesi contends that "the cinema, the cafés frequented by the artistic avant-garde, dance clubs, even brothels--that low life so loved by Bohemian Paris--became Simone de Beauvoir's regular haunts" (45). Unlike Simone, Elisabeth never experienced this life style, for young women of the bourgeoisie did not frequent cafés, and they did not go out without chaperones. As Elisabeth grew older, her parents increasingly limited her personal freedom. With her own independence, Simone began to see herself as

Elisabeth's rescuer. Through her education and her loss of faith, Simone believed that she had saved herself because she had gained personal agency and independence during a historical time period in France when it was rare for women to earn advanced degrees and to work outside the home. It was now her responsibility to save her best friend. After Elisabeth's death, Beauvoir blamed the social pressures imposed by the Lacoins and the values of the bourgeoisie for her best friend's death. Writing became her means of expressing her pain and outrage.

In an article published in the 2001-2002 edition of *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, Madeleine Lacoïn, Elisabeth's younger sister, sharply criticizes the content of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*. Although she and her siblings recognize the beautiful portrait of their sister depicted by Beauvoir throughout the text, they vehemently deny many of Beauvoir's claims about their family:

Je la crois tout à fait sincère quand elle affirme qu'en écrivant ses mémoires elle a 'soigneusement respecté la vérité,' mais je suis encore plus certaine, puisqu'elle raconte notre histoire avec la sienne, qu'elle a dénaturé souvent les faits, défiguré les personnages et ajouté même des choses qui ne tiennent pas debout, comme les mariages forcés de la famille (M. Lacoïn 140).

Thus, Madeleine Lacoïn not only puts Simone de Beauvoir "on trial" but also the entire genre of life-writing. As she further added, "Elle a jugé notre famille, qu'elle connaissait très peu et très mal, en leur attribuant des défauts qu'avaient réellement la plupart des familles bourgeoises de cette époque" (M. Lacoïn 141). Through her critique and protest of Beauvoir's work, Madeleine Lacoïn exhibits a fear of books and writing similar to that which her mother demonstrated during Elisabeth's childhood and adolescence.

For Madeleine Lacoïn, the main theme of Beauvoir's autobiography is her liberation from the bourgeoisie (M. Lacoïn 141). In a similar fashion, Terry Keefe identifies the thesis of the work as

the changing relationship with her parents: her conformism up to fourteen or fifteen; the discoveries and decisions through which she begins to find herself and tentatively assert her autonomy; the steady but painful movement away from her parents' values; and the eventual acquisition of real independence (31).

In my opinion, this over-simplifies this first autobiographical volume. While a polemical discussion of the bourgeoisie is woven throughout the work, this five-hundred page narrative addresses a wide variety of topics, including life at the Sorbonne, quotidian life in Paris, the inner world of two young women in the early twentieth century, the books both were reading, their coming of age, personal freedom, and religion. In my opinion, the underlying aim of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* is the celebration of Elisabeth's life. This is so central to the volume that the work possesses a biographical as well as an autobiographical quality. A generation later, as the next chapter will show, the themes of social class, family, gender issues, friendship, and *scolarité* remain very important in the works of Maryse Condé. Whereas concerns regarding race and colonization are absent in the narratives of Elisabeth Lacoïn and Simone de Beauvoir, the relationship between the African continent, the island of Guadeloupe, and the Hexagon are at the heart of the Caribbean writer's autobiographical writing.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**FRAMING THE FRAGMENTED SELF AND OTHER(S): MARYSE CONDÉ'S**  
***LE COEUR A RIRE ET A PLEURER* AND *HEREMAKHONON***

"Tenter l'autobiographie par les seuls mots français, c'est sous le lent scalpel, de l'autopsie à vif."

Assia Djebar, *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985)

**"Je ne suis pas née Antillaise, je le suis devenue"**

The colonial and postcolonial periods have witnessed the birth and the growth of new canons of female-authored literary works in French throughout the various regions of the non-Western French-speaking world. More than ever, women autobiographers from the colonized corners of the globe are writing and publishing narratives in French that relate their experiences under the hegemony of French colonization and Western imperialism. This body of published texts has led scholars to evaluate the way in which works of non-Western literature explore common themes such as gender, space, language, geography, and writing from the perspective of postcolonial women of color. Emilia Ippolito refers to autobiography as a "recurrent post-colonial genre of resistance and counter-discourse" (31). The act of (re)presenting the colonial past and the postcolonial present is so central to Francophone autobiographies that one can safely say that this (re)presentation of colonial and postcolonial experiences is the *sine qua non* of Francophone life-writings. Furthermore, the emergence of new literary canons has also caused scholars to reconsider and re-define the meaning and significance of *La Francophonie* within the postcolonial era. Unlike the nations of the African continent, the former French Indochina, and the neighboring island of Haiti, Guadeloupe and

Martinique did not experience first-hand the violent struggles for independence, decolonization, and the ambiguous, global transition from a colonial to an independent era. Although there were grassroots movements for independence, the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe have been classified as official departments of the Hexagon since 1946. With this departmental status in mind, Jennifer Sparrow explains that

Antilleans inhabit a socio-cultural no-man's land that is neither wholly African nor wholly European. As such, quests for personal and collective identity, rather than being considered outmoded and 'essentialist,' are crucial political projects for writers throughout the Caribbean (179).

Within the rich theoretical context of Francophone Caribbean writing, Maryse Condé's collection of autobiographical tales entitled *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* and her first novel *Heremakhonon* will serve as the primary literary texts of this chapter to analyze the coming of age of Véronica in *Heremakhonon* and Maryse in *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* while paying particular attention to the autobiographical qualities of each work. Published in 1999, *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* is perhaps Maryse Condé's most autobiographical novel to date. This collection of "true tales" explores the way in which the Caribbean child navigates and unravels adult issues such as colonial stereotypes, social class, and the racial divisions of Guadeloupe's three-tiered society. Although these two texts are separated by nearly twenty-five years, the fictional autobiography represented within the novel *Heremakhonon* seems to continue the narrative of Maryse in *Le coeur*. This chapter will thus explore the similarities and the differences between these two texts that were written during different periods of Condé's career. Such a comparison will shed light on her literary and intellectual trajectory. In addition, this chapter will explore how Condé's writing (re)presents the plight of the black, Antillean

woman, especially in conjunction with the themes of selfhood, identity, space, social class, personal freedom, friendship, and alterity. Finally, comparisons will be made to the autobiographical texts of Simone de Beauvoir and Elisabeth Lacoïn.

When speaking of her Antillean identity, Condé stated once that "certains ont la chance d'être Antillais en naissant, moi je dirais en parodiant Simone de Beauvoir que je ne suis pas née Antillaise, je le suis devenue"<sup>36</sup>. Although Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn, and Maryse Condé share many differences, the autobiographical texts of these three writers contain many striking parallels that merit serious study and comparative analysis. First and foremost, in the life-writing of Beauvoir, Lacoïn, and Condé, the autobiographical daughter's childhood was deeply rooted within the bourgeoisie. In addition, all three writers spent their formative years and / or significant periods of their childhood and adolescence in Paris. Although the island of Guadeloupe served as Condé's home base during childhood, her family made routine trips to Paris. As a result, the young Maryse was influenced by the everyday life of Paris in much the same way as Beauvoir and Lacoïn. The fact that her family was part of the exclusive black bourgeoisie of Point-à-Pitre also meant that the social values promoted within her home were not unlike those experienced by Simone and Elisabeth.

Upon reaching adulthood, Beauvoir and Condé chose to write about the bourgeoisie from a critical standpoint, often refusing to share many of the values of their parents in regard to rank and social class. A paradox exists as the once dutiful daughter who benefited from the social luxuries offered by the bourgeoisie (private schools,

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<sup>36</sup> Maryse Condé, « Notes sur un retour au pays natal. » *Conjonction: Revue Franco-Haitienne* 176 (Supplément 1987): 7-23, as quoted in Rosello 1995, 571.

regular trips to the museums of Paris, an emphasis on standard French, elegant summer vacations) undergoes a metamorphosis resulting in a refusal and abandonment of the bourgeoisie. However, the social benefits of the privileged classes paved the way to their advanced degrees from the Sorbonne and to their respective careers as writers, teachers, and intellectuals that eventually led them to distance themselves while turning a critical eye on their own milieu. In both cases the writer, who is simultaneously the narrator and the subject of the discourse, employs her writing as a form of resistance or protest against the bourgeois mentality and way of life. In this sense, a healing of the self takes place in literary space as the obedient daughter writes about the bourgeoisie. Maryse Condé's writing is embedded with the themes of race, skin color, and her status as a colonized Other. The incorporation of these elements represents a unique dimension of her own lived experience not present in Beauvoir's and Lacoïn's childhood narratives. Thus, my presentation of Maryse Condé will focus on racial discourse as well as the plight of the black Antillean female autobiographer and her relationship to the themes of gender, language, geography, alterity, and the postcolonial.

### **The Artificiality of Guadeloupe**

Maryse Condé often speaks of the artificiality of Guadeloupe since the island's original inhabitants, composed of Carib and Arawak Indians, were exterminated centuries ago. Today, the population of the Antilles is primarily composed of people from Europe, Africa, and Asia whose ancestors came to the island as a result of modern capitalism and colonialism. When speaking of Guadeloupe's diversity, Bukoye Arowolo states that

the French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe are relatively modern creations artificially put in place by capitalism. The societies are modern in the sense that the present political and sociological set-up came into being in the fifteenth century after the elimination of the aborigines. It is artificial because none of the present occupying racial groups is autochthonous (220).

Given the history of Guadeloupe and the unique relationship between the French West Indies and the Hexagon in the postcolonial era, this chapter proposes an analysis of the way in which life-writing facilitates the Caribbean writer's personal journey through this complex, socio-cultural labyrinth of individual and collective identities.

When speaking of the Caribbean and the postcolonial era, H. Adlai Murdoch explains that

in theoretical terms, French Caribbean postcolonialism is itself the locus of yet another level of paradoxical doubling. Typically, postcolonialism defines the period when links of domination and subservience with the colonizing country have been severed, when the subject territory can exercise that freedom of action and of expression inhibited by the colonial framework (2001, 2).

Today the society of contemporary Guadeloupe is a mosaic of several ethnic and racial groups that were transplanted to the island beginning in the sixteenth century. Specifically, the population is composed of the white descendents of plantation owners referred to as *les békés*, blacks who were brought to the island through the institutions of slavery<sup>37</sup>, and Indians (from India) and Chinese who came as indentured servants. Over the centuries, a mulatto class has developed, adding another dimension to the island's social hierarchy that is largely based on race and skin color. Sentiments about the

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<sup>37</sup> During the French Revolution in 1794 slavery was abolished. In 1802 Napoleon Bonaparte re-established slavery in Guadeloupe in response to the failing economy. Slavery was abolished permanently in 1848.

island's relationship with France are varied. Many Guadeloupeans are grateful that the island is an official department of France as a result of the economic and social benefits enjoyed by the people of Martinique and Guadeloupe. However, others lament the colonial dominance, imperialism, and hegemony that exist between France and the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, there were political groups who argued for independence. Today, as Sam Haigh explains, "It remains doubtful..., that there will ever be sufficient support, in the foreseeable future, for independence actually to be realized" (7).

### **French Caribbean Creole**

Although the prospect of formal independence from France is bleak, the growing popularity of French Caribbean Creole is an important source of cultural and linguistic agency for Creole populations. In the Caribbean, the term *Creole* is used to describe anyone who was born and raised in the region. It is also used to refer to persons of European, African, or mixed Afro-European descent in order to distinguish them from other ethnic groups. When speaking of the relationship between Creole and literary expression, Murdoch notes that

within this Creole postcoloniality, then, lies the articulative framework of an identitarian strategy that is both ambivalent and differential; the true resonance of these Creole fictions emerges in the discursive space within which alternative sites and strategies of inscription rewrite accepted notions of subjectivity, otherness, and modernity (2001, 3).

Thus, contradiction and uncertainty characterize the very notion of what it means to be Creole. As Murdoch further explains,

A Creole person can be either white or black, colonizer or colonized, articulating an essential ambiguity that both mediates and ruptures the strategies of containment that have circumscribed and determined the dominant designations of difference that have been a traditional corollary of the colonial encounter. What emerges from such a definition is primarily the play of difference that the term implies, for indeed a Creole subject or culture may be black or white, African, Caucasian, or East Asian, colonial or metropolitan (2001, 4).

*Creole* also refers to languages in the Caribbean that are derived from the combining of African and European languages, dialects, and syntax. Due to the historically low status of the Creole people in the eyes of European colonial powers, Creole languages have traditionally been considered as second-class dialects of the original languages. However, since the middle of the twentieth century, linguists have generally agreed that Creole languages are equal to other languages. As a result of these social, political, and academic changes, Creole languages have recently experienced a cultural renaissance. Now an official language in Guadeloupe, French Caribbean Creole is used increasingly in the media, film, and literature; it is also currently taught in some schools in Martinique and Guadeloupe. As Sam Haigh notes, Creole languages are a form of linguistic expression that "developed out of the plantation system and which has always had the secondary status of oral patois in relation to French as the dominant language of education, administration and social mobility" (11). Similarly, Murdoch describes "creoleness" as a post-colonial construct characterized by doubling, disjuncture, and difference (2001, 3). French Caribbean writers like Maryse Condé, I contend, demonstrate this postcolonial doubling and disjuncture by infusing their original French texts with Creole words and expressions.

### **Francophone Caribbean Literary Traditions**

Within this complex cultural, linguistic, historical, and racial arena, a distinct literary history has emerged that is unique to the French Caribbean. Some of the common themes expressed in French Caribbean literature are the dubious relationship with the French metropolis, the legacy of the plantation system, the painful history of slavery, the status of Creole as an official language that is equal to French, and the inseparability of race and social class. When speaking of Francophone Caribbean literary history, Marie-Denise Shelton explains that Caribbean theorists generally frame the French-speaking islands within the three terms of africanité<sup>38</sup>, créolité, and antillanité" (717). The following section will briefly outline these three movements.

The term "Negritude" was originally coined by the Martinican Aimé Césaire in 1935. Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, in 1939, is one of the most significant literary works of Caribbean literature of the twentieth century, for the text embodied the themes of Negritude in a way that no previous work had accomplished. Influenced by the Surrealist movement, Negritude promoted a refusal of the West and colonialism as well as a celebration of a universal black culture and identity that aimed to unite Africans and members of the African diaspora under these shared themes. One common thematic element in literary works influenced by the Negritude movement is the desire to return a pre-colonial Africa. The Negritude movement claimed that all black people belonged to a common historical heritage that originated in pre-colonial Africa. Furthermore, Negritude rejected Western cultural values and Enlightenment philosophy's concept of

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<sup>38</sup> Or Negritude.

the universal. The cultural values expressed by Césaire in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* were echoed by writers such as Léopold Sedar Senghor and Léon Damas. Later in this chapter we will examine how the experiences of Maryse Condé's protagonist of *Heremakhonon*, Véronica Mercier, negate the central themes of the Negritude movement.

The movement known as *Antillanité* or Creoleness that began in the early 1960s and is primarily associated with the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant is often viewed as the intellectual bridge between the poles of Négritude and Créolité or Caribbeaness. According to Glissant, *Antillanité* is an identity, a culture, and a state of being honed over time and throughout history. *Antillanité* is not European or African but specific to the Caribbean. Glissant rejected Negritude's claim to a unifying and universal cultural heritage shared by blacks around the world. According to him, Caribbean identity is not fixed and uniform but unique, heterogeneous, and fragmented (Lewis 70). Edouard Glissant criticized Négritude's appropriation of Western universalism, for the founders of the Negritude movement mimicked and duplicated a Western belief system in order to dismantle Occidental imperialism and hegemony. As Shireen Lewis explains,

It is particularly Négritude's complicity with universalism and France's continued efforts to assert French culture as universal—specifically through its official policies in French overseas departments such as Martinique—which Glissant continuously takes issue with throughout his writing (71).

The literary movement known as Créolité or “Caribbeaness” is, like *Antillanité*, a response to the Negritude movement. Créolité originated in Martinique in the 1980s under the leadership of the writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé who worked to establish a new literary school of thought that would express the

discourses of contemporary Creole societies. In 1989 they published a manifesto entitled *L'éloge de la Créolité* which aimed to dismantle the themes of previous Caribbean literary movements. Similar to *Antillanité*, *Créolité* is a refusal of the universal beliefs of *Négritude*, but it is first and foremost driven by language. Emphasis is placed on the intricate, historical process that led to the development of Creole languages and populations. Creole history began within the socioeconomic matrix of capitalism, colonialism, slavery, and the plantation system. As Shireen Lewis notes, “For Creolists, it is no longer a question of conceptualizing race, culture, and identity as derived from Africa but of a new paradigm based on the diasporic experience” (90). The notion of hybridity as well as the importance of belonging to a Creole culture is at the heart of the *Créolité* movement. Unlike the ideas of the *Négritude* movement, issues of race, skin color and the African diaspora are not the central focus of Creolists.

Within the discourses promoted by *Négritude*, *Antillanité*, and *Créolité*, the second half of the twentieth century is characterized by a significant increase in female-authored texts from the Caribbean. This body of women’s texts has revealed the fact that life in the Caribbean is a gendered experience. According to Nicole Aas-rouxparis, before 1950,

L'espace littéraire au féminin des Petites Antilles françaises se caractérise surtout par l'absence au sens d'invisibilité et de vide: absence due tant à la faible quantité d'auteurs-femmes dans un espace littéraire nettement dominé par le masculin, qu'à la rareté de l'inscription d'un véritable sujet féminin dans toute oeuvre fictionnelle que celle-ci soit écrite par un homme ou par une femme (854).

The increase in the number of published texts written by women during the second half of the twentieth century has worked to create canons of Caribbean and Francophone

literatures. Régine Latortue comments that "the growing body of literature by women writers is redefining the canon of Caribbean literature, challenging accepted notions of the self, gender, race, and history" (59).

Gerise Herndon discusses how Francophone (Caribbean) women's literature is different from literature produced by men from the same culture: "Caribbean women, unlike most male Caribbean writers, examine specifically gendered issues from the perspective of those who are doubly or triply marginalized in terms of gender, ethnicity, and geography" (732). One defining aspect of colonial systems is the fact that non-Western women experience a sort of double marginalization since they are marginalized for their race and their gender. Women's writing has worked to dismantle many of the negative and misogynist literary stereotypes of Caribbean women: According to Beverly Omerod, "Many of the well-known female protagonists in French Caribbean narratives are old: matriarchs, witches, healers. They are often symbolic in a way that involves physical unattractiveness: cane-field workers with bent backs and gnarled fingers" (102). The protagonists of *Heremakhonon* and *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer*, on the other hand, offer models of femininity that contradict earlier textual stereotypes created by male writers.

### **Maryse Condé as Nomadic Intellectual**

Maryse Condé's literary characters work to dismantle the former stereotypes of Antillean women that were constructs of both Western and non-Western male authors. The genre of life-writing is a particularly powerful arena of expression for deconstructing

forms of oppression, for the subaltern writer is able to articulate and publish her own lived experiences. For Maryse Condé, autobiographical writing is a means of self-discovery and re-invention within the complex postcolonial triangle of plural identities. While Simone de Beauvoir spent most of her life within the close intellectual circles of Paris, Maryse Condé is a nomadic intellectual who, through her writing, weaves together several cultures. Her geographical trajectory can best be described as a cultural hybridization between her home and birthplace of Guadeloupe, the mother continent of Africa, the colonial power of France, and the United States. As a result, Leah Hewitt refers to Condé's status within Guadeloupe as that of the "native foreigner" (1993, 93). Similar to Leah Hewitt, Thomas Spear further explains that "to classify Maryse Condé as a 'Caribbean' writer, a 'woman' writer, or a 'black' writer reduces her identity as author to that of a representative individual within a specifically geographic, gendered, or racist collectivity" (723). According to Spear,

By portraying a myriad of colonized or subjugated peoples--identified as subaltern in sexual, racial, or even geographic terms--Condé universalizes the problematics of self-affirmation both against pervasively discriminatory or exclusionary cultural modes and against presumptions of affinity the particular individual has with any family or community (723).

Today Maryse Condé is best known as a novelist, playwright, literary critic, professor, and radio producer. Born "Maryse Boucolon" in Point-à-Pitre in 1937, she was the youngest of eight children. Condé left the island of Guadeloupe in 1953 at the age of sixteen to pursue her studies in Paris. It is also in Paris that she met and married<sup>39</sup> Mamadou Condé, an actor from Guinea. She did not return to the island of Guadeloupe

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<sup>39</sup> They married in 1959.

to take up permanent residence until 1986. She has lived and taught in the African nations of Guinea, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. While in Paris, she studied at the Université Paris III, Sorbonne and earned the equivalent of a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature. Condé has been a professor of Black African literature at the Université Paris IV, Sorbonne and has also taught at Columbia University in the Department of Romance Philology. Her writing has earned her numerous awards including *Le Grand Prix Littéraire de la femme* (1986) and *Le Prix Yourcenar* (1999). In 1982 she married the famous translator Richard Philcox who has translated many of her works into English.

Condé's research at the Sorbonne focused on black stereotypes in West Indian literature. She paid particular attention to the themes of race, language, and gender to explore and portray the way that the black Antillean woman sees herself in relation to the discourses of Europe, Africa, and the United States. Specifically, Condé strives to show how the Antillean woman's experience is different from (and similar to) women from Europe, Africa, and the United States. From a stylistic point of view, her texts create intricate mosaics of language and cultural references that reach across geographic boundaries. Linguistically she incorporates Creole, English, and several African languages into her French texts. She is interested in establishing new literary canons with an appeal to a larger and diverse readership that include groups and writers previously marginalized. Condé's protagonists, whether male or female, are typically portrayed as outsiders or individuals who are (or have been) living in exile and thus away from their native land(s). Another trademark of her writing style is her use of irony, sarcasm, and

humor. Her literary style has been influenced by African and Caribbean writers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Simone Schwartz-Bart, and Léopold Senghor. In addition, she has been influenced by American writers such as Booker T. Washington, William Faulkner, and Alex Haley, French canonical authors, and even the twentieth-century philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. Unlike Simone de Beauvoir, Condé does not believe in committed literature or *littérature engagée*; that is to say that she does not believe that literature or a literary work has the power to change the world. Her writing dismantles the framework of the Negritude movement that promotes the myth of Africa as a utopia for subaltern subjects of the diasporas.

During her childhood, Condé's family formed an integral part of the black bourgeoisie of the close island community of Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe. Her father was a successful businessman and her mother was one of the island's first black, female school teachers. As a result of her childhood experience in Guadeloupe, Condé's writing is heavily charged with the hierarchies of the island's three-tiered society that is black, white, and mulatto. Her novels are different from those of her contemporaries from Guadeloupe due to the fact that she will often write from the perspective of the bourgeois class rather than representing the plight of the underprivileged classes. Many of her works fall under the category of autobiographical fiction to such an extent that the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred. When speaking of the relationship between Condé's own experiences and the themes and subject matter of her literary creations, Beverley Noakes states that "something of her own life often serves as a starting point for elements in her novels" (128).

Despite the fact that Condé is recognized world-wide as a scholar and an intellectual, she does not belong to a school or a particular literary movement. Her name has not been routinely associated with feminist discourse or with the New Novelists or any other particular literary school, trend, or style. The themes and subject matters of Condé's novels are as nomadic as many of her protagonists. Her writing is an excellent example of *métissage* or the braiding of several cultures. Gerise Herndon states that

the extensive use of multicultural, historical and intertextual reference by Condé also shows the writer's concern for educating her readers about Africa, different areas of the Diaspora, and Europe. Such intertextual reference also assumes a broad-based readership: her works are aimed at more than a Caribbean audience (733).

Although Condé is not viewed as a feminist, her writing is of interest to feminists around the world since her texts focus on the plight of women in the Antilles, Africa, America, and Europe. For Condé's heroines, the themes of race, language, and social class are inseparable from gender. Leah Hewitt points out that "Condé's work as a feminist critic resembles the American feminist project of creating and reforming literary canons: her analysis is in part designed to enlarge the audience for women writers" (1990, 170). Like the Algerian writer Assia Djebar, Condé has dedicated a significant amount of her scholarship and research to the exploration of pre-colonial history as well as the devastating and painful colonial past that is her undeniable heritage. The subject of the African continent and its diasporas is an essential element of her writing. The juxtaposition of island and continental (mainland) societies is also an important trademark of her texts. While the themes of "Africa as a utopia" or "the return to mother Africa" are constructed and then dismantled within her writing, Condé avoids Manichean

categories such as the West / non-West, preferring to represent the Caribbean as a mosaic or a crossroads of several cultures. Marie-Denise Shelton describes Condé's intellectual relationship with history in the following manner:

She wishes to rewrite Caribbean history to include models of womanhood who defied the logic of oppression: Nanny the Maroon or Solitude. For Condé, women are makers of history, agents of culture. However, as writers, as women, they are caught in a fierce struggle between visibility and invisibility, between voice and silence (721).

Condé's published works shatter this silence and invisibility.

Through her writing and her scholarship, Condé has denounced many of the claims of the Negritude movement such as the notion that a universal community of black people exists throughout the world. Although Condé has been greatly influenced by Aimé Césaire, she does not subscribe to the Negritude movement for three main reasons which are outlined by Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waiga's. As she explains, Condé is against the Negritude movement for

having embraced a false identity by endorsing the category of 'Negro,' and thereby having preached a false solidarity of black people. Second, for having portrayed Africa as the motherland for all black people of the world, and third for having idealized Africa, thereby making of it a mythical, nonexistent space (554).

In the following sections, we will see the way in which Condé's protagonists refuse and dismantle the central themes of Negritude.

### *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer*

While Simone de Beauvoir's collection of texts and essays are laced with a clear anti-bourgeois sentiment that is often polemic in nature, Condé dismantles bourgeois

cultural values by employing irony and humor to relate tales or "contes vrais" from her childhood in an anecdotal format. Unlike Beauvoir's five-hundred page autobiographical narrative of the events from 1908-1929, the structure of *Le coeur* is not a continuous *récit*. Rather, *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* is divided into seventeen chapters or episodes which can be read independently and even out of order. The theme, subject matter or principal character of each segment is announced within the title of each chapter or "conte," giving an eponymous quality to each autobiographical act. Thus, each tale is much like a scene in a theatrical performance, which makes one think of the "pièce mal faite" described by Elisabeth Lacoïn when writing about her own family. The individual chapters end with a lesson that deals with race, social class, or language that is passed on to the reader by the narrator. Despite these differences, Condé's description of every-day life is strikingly similar to the written accounts of both Beauvoir and Lacoïn. Notably, Condé writes about being forbidden to socialize with other children who did not live up to the high social standards of her family as well as her parents' day-to-day feelings of superiority in regards to members of the lower classes. Condé discusses the importance of education, language, and outward appearances, and how these values were primarily enforced by the mother while the father is largely left in the background. In this way, the reader learns about the island's complex social matrix along with the child-narrator.

Condé's portrayal of everyday life within the heart of the island's racially divided society in *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* explores the way in which the child psychologically develops a sense of personal identity by negotiating concepts such as language, gender, race, and class divisions during the innocence of the childhood years.

In Condé's literary world, the themes of seeing and being seen are crucial to the concept of identity. Specifically, the chapters of *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* detail the way in which the child sees and is seen by others. When speaking of the concept of identity within Maryse Condé's writing, Leah Hewitt states that "what remains distinct in Condé's work, is her self-conscious literary formulations of the notion of identity: it is an artificial construct, made up of heterogeneous borrowings, and it shifts according to one's relative position in the signifying chain of culture" (1990, 190). The child's coming of age as represented within autobiographical discourse is largely the result of the intersection of the Self and Other(s) within the nucleus of the family, the French colonial school, and beyond. In many ways, the protagonist of *Heremakhonon*, Véronica Mercier, seems to continue where Maryse in *Le coeur* ended her narrative.

While *Heremakhonon* is not a traditional autobiography, *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* is a collection of autobiographic or "True Tales" that portray scenes or episodes from Condé's childhood and adolescence. The true tales represent a literary space where individuals are first and foremost portrayed through physical descriptions, for the portrayal of each individual begins with a discussion of skin color. Since race and skin color are visible, characters in the novel are typically presented to the reader through a detailed description of their skin. For example, her mother is described as having a "peau de sapotille" (*Le coeur* 78) while their servant Mabo Julie is "une vieille mulâtresse, très blanche de peau" (*Le coeur* 55). Since racial identity frames the individual within the island's racially divided society, a discourse on race, skin color, and social hierarchies is embedded throughout her collection. Condé's use of irony, sarcasm, and subtle

suggestions allows the reader to evaluate the events presented in each chapter while independently drawing conclusions. Within the narrative, the voices of the child and the intellectual adult *écrivaine* collaborate and collide. The reader encounters both the innocence of the child and the wisdom of the adult autobiographer within this literary space.

### **Maryse Condé Writes the Bourgeoisie**

Throughout the various chapters of *Le coeur* the discussion and presentation of the bourgeoisie is almost always linked to the mother, thus demonstrating that the maternal figure is the driving force behind the preservation and continuation of bourgeois ethics and values. In the opening paragraph of *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer*, Condé introduces the reader to her mother and father through an anecdote in which she states that the Second World War represents one of the most difficult and tumultuous time periods for her parents. The reader is subsequently shocked by the explanation that follows. According to Condé, her parent's disdain for the war was

non pas à cause de la France coupée en deux, des camps de Drancy ou d'Auschwitz, de l'extermination de six millions de Juifs, ni de tous ces crimes contre l'humanité qui n'ont pas fini d'être payés, mais parce que pendant sept interminables années, ils avaient été privés de ce qui comptait le plus pour eux: leurs voyages en France (*Le coeur* 11).

Without further comment, Condé continues to paint the portrait of her family and her early childhood. The citation is one of the most exemplary and significant of the larger work, for the reader is presented with the socio-political division between the intellectual daughter and her parents. Maryse Condé the writer and intellectual is horrified by the

atrocities and crimes against humanity that took place during the Second World War while her parents lament the loss of their annual vacation to the capital.

In addition to demonstrating the dichotomy between family filiations and extra-familial affiliation, Condé's true tales show that Guadeloupe is more than just a colonized island in the postcolonial West Indies. Guadeloupean society is a *métissage* or cradle of language, race, social class, and plural identities. Since the themes of watching, seeing, and being seen by the white, colonial Other are central to the novel's discourse, Hegel's master-slave dialectic provides a theoretical and philosophical framework of the way in which individual identity is constructed. According to Hegel's dialectic, one can only come to know the Self through contact with an(Other). Thus, individual identity itself is constructed through a mutual dance of recognition, projection, struggle and the contemplation of the self through the existence / presence of another individual. Seeing and being seen are essential components of the process since it is through contact with an Other that the individual encounters notions of difference. In this way, the collection can be read as a series of Hegelian systems that repeat themselves within each chapter.

Throughout the novel, Maryse is portrayed as a witness who watches and learns from her parent's interaction with others both within and outside of the island's prestigious black bourgeoisie. After the end of the Second World War, the family routinely spent long periods of time in Paris in order to benefit from all of the cultural splendors of the metropolis. These trips to Paris included visits to the Louvre, the Orangerie, the Luxembourg gardens, and the Opera. This time spent in France during her childhood enriched but also complicated Maryse's concept of identity. While the family

was in Paris, she noted that the Parisians would objectify her through comments such as "elle est mignonne, la petite négresse" (*Le cœur* 114). At the same time, Parisian waiters would compliment the family on their superior use of the French language. Condé describes her mother and father's attitude toward the French of France: "Nous sommes plus instruits. Nous avons de meilleures manières. Nous lisons davantage. Certains d'entre eux n'ont jamais quitté Paris alors que nous connaissons le Mont-Saint-Michel, la Côte d'Azur et la Côte basque" (*Le cœur* 13). Not only did her parents believe themselves to be equal to the French, they in fact saw themselves as culturally and socially superior due to their race, their affluence, and their education. By adopting the universal system of bourgeois codes promoted by the metropolis, her parents viewed themselves as superior: "Ni l'un ni l'autre n'éprouvaient le moindre sentiment d'infériorité à cause de leur couleur. Ils se croyaient les plus brillants, les plus intelligents, la preuve par neuf de l'avancement de leur Race de Grands-Nègres" (*Le cœur* 18). At the same time, Maryse was also painfully aware of how she was seen by Parisians as they watched, observed and made comments about her: "J'étais une surprise. L'exception d'une race que les Blancs s'obstinaient à croire repoussante et barbare" (*Le cœur* 114).

Her parents' attitude of superiority was not limited to the borders of the Hexagon. According to Condé, there were very few members of the island community worthy of socializing with her mother and father. Thus, her parents went to great lengths to show their social superiority by distinguishing and distancing themselves from blacks and mulattos from the poorer, working classes. This social ostracism created an exclusive island based on social class, race, skin color, ethnic background, and language within the

island of Guadeloupe. This is what her brother Sandrino is referring to when he states that "papa et maman sont une paire d'aliénés" (*Le coeur* 127). In this way, the parents occupied an exclusive social island within the island of Guadeloupe. As a result, they were socially isolated from almost all of the inhabitants of Guadeloupe. Her mother believed it was necessary to restrict the social life of her children in order to maintain the family's prestige. Like Elisabeth Lacoïn, Condé writes about being forbidden to socialize with other children who did not live up to the high social standards of her family. She also describes her parents' day-to-day feelings of superiority in regard to members of the island's lower classes. In addition, Condé discusses the importance of education, language, and outward appearances, and how these values were primarily promoted and enforced by her mother in order to preserve the family's social status.

### **Space, Language, and Contact With the Other**

Language is central to *Le coeur* and inseparable from social class and individual identity. Condé's mother is presented as the family authority on matters of social class as well as the gate-keeper of language use within the family. She is also portrayed as the driving force behind the preservation and the successful continuation of bourgeois ethics and values. For Maryse, speaking Creole was forbidden to such an extent that her mother limited her social circles. Her mother's attempt to control her social life echoes Madame Lacoïn's attempts to control her daughter's circle of friends, since Elisabeth was deprived of her personal liberty as her mother became increasingly concerned with her daughter's friend's and acquaintances. Of the three writers, Simone de Beauvoir had the greatest

amount of freedom during her adolescent years, even though she does describe in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* how her mother pinned together pages of her novels that contained material that were deemed unsuitable.

After the end of the Second World War, Condé's family made routine visits to Paris in order to benefit from all of the cultural splendors of the capital, which was also the center of the colonial empire. Ironically, Maryse was given much more social freedom in Paris than in Point-à-Pitre:

Nos parents nous autorisaient à sortir autant que nous le voulions et même à fréquenter les autres enfants. En ce temps-là, cette liberté m'étonnait. Je compris plus tard qu'en France, nos parents n'avaient pas peur que nous nous mettions à parler le créole ou que nous prenions goût au gwoka<sup>40</sup> comme les petits-nègres<sup>41</sup> (*Le cœur* 14).

Her parents' emphasis on the relationship between language and social class is not unlike the attitude upheld by Georges de Beauvoir who routinely mocked the language of the lower classes in order to show that he was different and thus superior.

Creole is embedded throughout the autobiographical tales as if the rebellious daughter, who is also the author of the text, were inviting the non-Antillean reader to learn this forbidden language. The reader is even provided with a French / Creole glossary which furnishes the text with a pedagogical element. By incorporating Creole into the narrative, the daughter disobeys her mother through her autobiographical writing. However, her mother's staunch attitude towards Creole is temporarily suspended in the chapter entitled *gros plan*. In this chapter, Maryse and her parents pay a surprise visit to her mother's cousin Seraphin and his wife Charlotte. Upon arrival, Charlotte is in labor

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<sup>40</sup> A type of drum common to the islands.

<sup>41</sup> Les pauvres

and without a midwife. Her mother immediately assumes the position of midwife and delivers the baby. However, in order to do so she speaks in Creole to Charlotte, telling her when to push: "Ou kaye pousé à pwézan" (*Le coeur* 110). Despite the quantities of blood pouring from Charlotte, Maryse is more shocked by the language that emerged from her mother. The arrival of a bloody, screaming newborn is secondary to the birth of language that Maryse witnessed when her mother spoke Creole. This incident demonstrates that gendered events such as childbirth, can take precedence over language and social class. Within the feminine space of the birthing room, Maryse witnesses two births; one is the birth of the child while the other is the mother's linguistic delivery of a 'forbidden' form of discourse.

In addition to speaking Creole, social contact with the French of France is controlled and restricted by her mother. In the chapter entitled "La plus belle femme du monde," Maryse encounters her ideal beauty when she observes a young, White woman named Amélie sitting at another pew during a church service. Since Amélie is seen by Maryse in church, the experience seems mystical and divine. At the same time, Amélie, who is dressed in white lace, is portrayed as an angel. Later, when Maryse tells her mother that Amélie is the most beautiful woman she has ever seen and her idea of true beauty, her mother is horrified. "Elle exposa mon crime: comment mon idéal de beauté pouvait-il être une femme blanche? N'existait-il pas des personnes de ma couleur qui méritaient cette distinction?" (*Le coeur* 93). After her mother's reaction, Maryse no longer looks at Amélie in church, explaining that "j'avais compris que sa beauté m'était interdite" (*Le coeur* 94). This incident demonstrates the power and importance of a

child's gaze, as well as the great separation between the racially divided society. According to her mother, the beauty of the white Other is off limits.

In addition to contact with adults, interaction and friendship with other children in school and beyond is an important aspect of any child's social education. In the chapter entitled "Leçon d'histoire" Maryse engages in play with a white girl named Anne-Marie. Maryse soon finds herself in a submissive role through which she is spanked, kicked, and made to play a horse and servant while Anne-Marie plays the role of the rider and master. These games continue for a week until finally Maryse rebels and says, "Je ne veux plus que tu me donnes des coups" (*Le cœur* 49). However, her playmate states, "Je dois te donner des coups parce que tu es une négresse." (*Le cœur* 49). This seemingly innocent child's play is a model of the Hegelian dialectic. Both girls participate in a dance of recognition, projection, struggle, and then the mediation of difference within the self / other paradigm. At the end of the chapter our narrator states, "Je me demande si Anne-Marie et moi, nous n'avons pas été, l'espace de nos prétendus jeux, les réincarnations miniatures d'une maîtresse et de son esclave souffre-douleur" (*Le cœur* 51). It is through the innocence of child's play that Maryse begins to understand the painful history of slavery as well as the weight and consequences of racial difference.

While contact with other children outside of the family and the school is an important aspect of a child's coming of age, the French school system within the colonies provided another important social arena for identity formation. For the bourgeois of Guadeloupe, the education of their daughters was just as important as it was for Parisian families. Similar to Simone and Elisabeth who attended the prestigious *Cours Adeline*

*Désir*, Maryse was sent to a prominent private school that was run by the sisters Valérie and Adélaïde Rama. The values of the bourgeoisie were promoted within the French colonial school in much the same way that they were upheld in the private space of the home. In the chapter "Lutte des classes" Condé describes her school as, "la plus cotée, celle où les gens qui se croyaient grands bourgeois envoyaient leurs enfants" (*Le cœur* 29). Simone, Elisabeth, and Maryse are similar in their scholastic achievements since all three are described as brilliant and at the head of their class. However, school was, above all, a time for interacting with other children and establishing meaningful friendships. It is during school that Simone and Elisabeth met and became best friends. Similarly, Maryse met her best friend, Yvelise, while attending the bourgeois school. Yvelise, like Elisabeth, plays a significant role throughout Condé's childhood narratives.

Maryse and Yvelise are so similar in their appearance and dress that they are often mistaken for twins when they are seen by strangers. Their mothers, who are also best friends, are described in the following manner: "Elles avaient le même statut envié dans la société, toutes deux étant institutrices, mariées à des hommes à l'aise matériellement" (*Le cœur* 38). In this citation both mothers are portrayed as equals and socio-economic twins. The girls, however, perform very differently at school; Maryse is at the head of the class while Yvelise is at the bottom. One day, Maryse is given an assignment at school in which she must write an essay describing her best friend. Thus, she is asked to portray and frame the identity of another individual through her writing. In her description, Maryse paints a less than favorable portrait of her best friend in which she indicates that Yvelise is neither pretty nor a gifted student in school. The content of the

essay results in a heated quarrel between both families and the girls are forbidden to see each other outside of school. Condé describes the absurdity of the situation: "Les grandes personnes entrèrent dans la danse et oublièrent l'origine enfantine de cette querelle. La conséquence fut que ma mère m'interdit de mettre les pieds chez Yvelise" (*Le coeur* 42). This chapter demonstrates that in addition to race, social class, and language use, education, literacy, and scholastic aptitude are key factors in the construction of identity. Even though Maryse and Yvelise share many common traits, both girls are aware that their academic performance is an important aspect separating them. Much like Madame Lacoïn, who eventually forbade Elisabeth to socialize with Simone and the other intellectuals at the Sorbonne, the mother of Maryse believed it was necessary to restrict the social life of her daughter in order to maintain the family's prestige.

School in Paris did not prove to be any easier for the young Maryse. At the age of thirteen, she was asked by one of her teachers to give an exposé on a novel from the French West Indies. Maryse was conscious of the fact that in the eyes of her Parisian classmates she was seen as an exotic icon. In order to complete the assignment, she decided to present Joseph Zobel's *La rue cases-nègres*, which is an autobiographical novel about a young boy from Martinique named José who is raised by his grandmother during the 1930s. The publication of Joseph Zobel's *La rue cases-nègres* in 1950 was significant since it was one of the first autobiographical works to represent the poverty and suffering of the black, underprivileged classes of the post-slavery plantation system. Through this intertextuality, Condé's true tales establish an auto-referential dimension since her own autobiography engages the life-writing of another Caribbean child. Yet in

contrast to Maryse, whose social world was almost entirely limited to the bourgeoisie, José grew up within the plantation system in a state of extreme poverty. While his story is exotic and surreal for Maryse, she becomes painfully aware of the socio-economic separation between herself and the novel's main character. The reading of this novel and the discovery of Zobel's writing marks an important turning point or awakening in her life, for she realizes how different she is from other children of Guadeloupe. Condé identifies this scholastic event as the catalyst of her political *engagement*. Ironically, this experience takes place in Paris while Maryse is far from her birthplace. When she delivers the exposé to her classmates, she finds herself in the midst of an exotic cultural performance that echoes the experience of *Ourika* in the novel by Claire de Duras. As Maryse explains, "J'étais peau noire, masque blanc et c'est pour moi que Frantz Fanon allait écrire" (*Le cœur* 120). She also becomes aware of the historical reality of her ancestors and their Caribbean roots: "D'un seul coup tombait sur mes épaules le poids de l'esclavage, de la Traite, de l'oppression coloniale, de l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme, des préjugés de couleur dont personne, à part quelquefois Sandrino, ne me parlait jamais" (*Le cœur* 118). What is most important and significant about this scene at school in Paris is that not only did she learn an important lesson about social class in the French Antilles, but she learned this lesson in France, through contact with the colonial Other.

### **Death and Rebirth**

During the time when Maryse is studying in Paris, her father's eyesight begins to fail, leaving him almost completely blind. While her father's eyesight is almost gone, our narrator's eyes are opening, for she is starting to see the world with her own set of values rather than with the bourgeois values of her parents. In addition to her father's loss of sight, we also learn of her mother's death, which coincides with the (re)birth of Maryse, the intellectual daughter. Finally, her brother Sandrino, who served as her guide, confident, and social compass, has also died. After losing her mother and brother, Maryse is very much on her own for her parents and brother can no longer guide her through society. As a result, the text comes full circle thematically since the narrative begins and ends with discussions of the narrator's births. While the stories debut with her actual birth, the autobiographical narratives end with the birth or renaissance of Maryse Condé, the engaged intellectual who has socially and intellectually emancipated herself from her parent's social sphere.

Maryse Condé's collection of autobiographical tales show how the child psychologically unravels the mysteries of personal and collective identity through social interactions within the family, school, church, and beyond. As the Caribbean child forms her cultural, social, and linguistic identity, she embarks on an identity quest in which she must situate the Other and the Self within an intricate social labyrinth whose limits reach far beyond the sanctuary of the Caribbean islands. This identity quest of Maryse in *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* led her to leave the island of Guadeloupe at the age of sixteen to continue her studies in Paris. Similarly, Véronica Mercier, the fictional narrator of

*Heremakhonon*, has been in Paris pursuing a degree in Philosophy at the Sorbonne prior to her departure for West Africa. Her desire to continue to answer questions about the self and thus to find her pre-colonial African ancestors is the catalyst that causes her to leave Paris where she has been for nine years, for a three-month stay in West Africa. In this way, Véronica's story seems to begin where the narrative of *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* ended. This personal journey to find her ancestral roots in postcolonial Africa is portrayed within the fictional autobiography of Maryse Condé's first novel, *Heremakhonon*.

### ***Heremakhonon*. Wait For Happiness**

Written in 1976<sup>42</sup>, *Heremakhonon* is viewed and labeled by scholars as one of Condé's "African novels"<sup>43</sup>. The original title, *Heremakhonon*, is a Malinke<sup>44</sup> word that means both "wait for happiness" and "welcome house." Written in the form of a false or fictional autobiographical narrative, the novel pushes autobiographical writing to its limits, challenging the borders of the genre itself for the reader must constantly distinguish between the fictional and the autobiographic. The account of Véronica Mercier's search for identity has traditionally been read by critics as a failed quest for ancestral roots and selfhood since Véronica's failure to locate her pre-colonial ancestors seems to negate the central claims and discourse of the Negritude movement. As a result, she is most often interpreted as a negative protagonist or an anti-heroine. Yet there is, I

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<sup>42</sup> The novel was originally published in 1976 under the title *Heremakhonon*. In 1988, a second edition was published under the title *En attendant le bonheur* with the original title *Heremakhonon* in parenthesis.

<sup>43</sup> *Une Saison à Rihata* (1981) and *Ségou* (1984) are also part of Condé's African series.

<sup>44</sup> Malinke is spoken in Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and Senegal.

contend, an alternate reading of Véronica's personal narrative. Although Véronica did not find her black ancestors with roots<sup>45</sup> in Africa, her time abroad did help her resolve questions about her own, and true identity. Furthermore, a great deal of learning and personal growth did occur within her, and she is a changed protagonist when she leaves Africa to return to Paris at the end of her three-month stay.

Like Condé herself, Véronica Mercier is a nomad, in search of personal identity as well as a collective history that she can claim as her own. Her search for cultural roots and ancestors leads her on a journey from Guadeloupe to Paris, then to West Africa, and back to Paris at the end of the narrative. As she wanders from place to place in search of answers about her identity and pre-colonial history, she comes to realize over time that her search is interior and personal rather than exterior and geographical. At the end of the narrative, Véronica understands that she must look inside herself in order to understand her true identity. Her voyage, which is geographical as well as psychological, brings together in literary space the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. Specifically, Véronica wanted to know what Africa was like before Western colonization. The triangular intersection of these three corners of the globe within this fictional autobiographical narrative highlights the cultural oppositions as well as the links between France and the former colonies in Africa that have recently become independent. The narrative also emphasizes the opposition and cultural gap between Guadeloupe and Africa. The countries of West Africa are independent while Guadeloupe is an official department of France.

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<sup>45</sup> Referred to as « nègres avec aïeux » by Véronica throughout the text.

Although Véronica's black ancestors came from Africa, space and time have erased any trace of quotidian life in Africa prior to Western colonization. Thus, the cultural roots that Véronica hopes to find no longer exist. As Arlette M. Smith explains,

She perceives herself as the product of imperfectly woven disparate cultural strands: remote, blurred, distorted fragments of her African heritage, mixed with multiple elements of French culture, which, despite the receptivity with which she assimilates them, she can never claim as indigenous to herself (48).

For Véronica, the African continent is a paradise that will help her solve her identity issues. What she does not know at the onset of her journey is that this image of contemporary Africa that has been implanted in her mind does not correspond to reality.

When speaking of Véronica's image of Africa, H. Adalai Murdoch explains that prior to her arrival in West Africa, the continent

had been made a mythical Other, a unified whole in which her desire for a singular, valorized subjectivity had been inscribed. Through the internalization and acceptance of the erasure of her own cultural traditions, carried out as a natural corollary of the subjection to a colonizer's discourse, this subject came to seek racial, cultural, and historical specificity through the elaboration of a desire for the absent, devalorized Other, whose absence from the economy of political and socio-cultural exchange rendered it deceptively coherent as a ground of infinite subjective possibility (1996, 582).

It is this fascination with Africa that causes Véronica to leave Paris for the unnamed West African nation.

During her three months in Africa, Véronica must face and accept the painful historical circumstances of slavery that brought her ancestors to the French West Indies beginning in the sixteenth century. She must also confront colonization and the realities of the postcolonial era. Even though Guadeloupe never experienced the violent struggles

for independence that took place throughout Francophone Africa and the former French Indochina, she is forced to evaluate (and accept) Guadeloupe's relationship of economic dependence with the Hexagon. As Arlette Smith points out,

She feels trapped by the three dimensions of her cultural heritage—Antillean, French, and African—which coexist in her psyche without being able to blend harmoniously; she feels them to be irreconcilable. Her ethnic African heritage, her Guadeloupean socio-cultural background, and her French intellectual training have transformed her into a person who is neither totally African, nor Guadeloupean, nor French (50).

While in Paris, Véronica's romantic relationship with the white architect Jean-Michel made her realize the great cultural void between Guadeloupe and the French metropolis. Ironically, the time spent in France and in West Africa made it possible for her to understand the very nature of Caribbean culture, which is unique and distinct from that of the colonial metropolis as well as the nations of the African continent. At the end of the narrative, Véronica comes to realize that her home, history, and her identity are found within the small island of Guadeloupe. This learning process and Véronica's coming of age are the essence of the fictional autobiography within *Heremakhonon*.

### ***Heremakhonon* as Autobiographical Fiction**

*Heremakhonon* is by no means a traditional autobiography according to the framework provided by Philippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique*, for there is a clear distinction between Véronica Mercier, the narrator / protagonist, and the author Maryse Condé. Condé structures the narrative in the form of a fictitious autobiographical text within which Véronica's search for ancestors and for her own identity takes place. The first-person narrative is delivered through Véronica's own interior monologue which

is the only linguistic medium through which the reader comes to know Véronica. Yet like Maryse in *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer*, Véronica Mercier is a young Guadeloupean woman from the heart of the island's prominent black bourgeoisie. Throughout the narrative, Véronica is self-critical and continually asks questions about the intersection of the Self, Guadeloupe, France, and Africa, as well as her reasons for coming to Africa: "Est-ce pour cela que je suis venue en Afrique? Est-ce dans ce rôle que je trouverai mon identité?" (*Heremakhonon* 134). By constantly posing difficult questions of selfhood, Véronica invites the reader into the text, and in this way, the narrative is a pedagogical exercise for both reader and protagonist. The reader becomes actively engaged in the quest and learns about the Caribbean, France, and Africa along with Véronica.

Although there is a clear distinction between Maryse Condé and Véronica Mercier, the many similarities between author and heroine provide the text with an autobiographic quality that explains why Mireille Rosello refers to Véronica as an "Autobiographical fictionalized self" (567). As Leah Hewitt explains,

Although Condé has manifested a certain recalcitrance toward formal autobiography, especially toward its immodest, confessional tones, she is nevertheless, creatively alert to the way elements of her own personal history intersect with those of other women, particularly black Antilleans"; "If *Heremakhonon* is not autobiography in the strict sense, it is nevertheless a powerful enactment of the way language articulates the multiple, contradictory fictions of self" (1990, 162, 171).

Like Condé, Véronica Mercier has a degree from a Parisian university, she is from the privileged black bourgeoisie of Guadeloupe, and she has spent significant time living in West Africa and Europe. Individuals who played an important role in Condé's life such

as her cousin Seraphin, his wife Charlotte, and Mabo Julie are also referred to within the narrative.

Véronica's journey from Guadeloupe to France, and then to West Africa is not only geographical, but also cultural, linguistic, and sexual in nature. Love and sexual relationships are at the "heart" of her search for selfhood. Like Elisabeth Lacoïn's *Carnets et Correspondance, Heremakhonon* contains three distinct love stories. What is unique about Véronica Mercier is that cultural identity and sexual relationships with the Other coexist and are experienced simultaneously. Thus, Véronica enters into romantic relationships in all three geographic locations. Each of the three liaisons is with a member of one of the island's racial divisions that are black, white and mulatto. Daniel Morris explains the socio-cultural position occupied by mulattos in contemporary Guadeloupean society: "While whites place at the top of this social order, mulattos also hold a privileged place .... mulattos enjoy a freedom that Véronica and her black bourgeoisie do not have because, in mulattos, the 'sang noir' is so diluted that they could deny its presence" (24). Furthermore, Véronica chooses to have relationships with men that her parents and family do not approve of. Her geographic relocations are always linked to a sexual relationship with a man from the region where she is living. When Véronica's family discovers her love affair with a Guadeloupean mulatto named Jean-Marie de Roseval, she is sent to France by her parents who hope that their daughter will permanently break this liaison that they have deemed inappropriate. According to Véronica's parents, it is not acceptable for a daughter from the black bourgeoisie to enter into a romantic relationship with a mulatto. One cannot help but think of the way in

which Elisabeth Lacoïn's Mother sent her daughter to Germany for four months so that she would break ties with the group of intellectuals at the Sorbonne.

### **A Bourgeois "Marilisse"**

In the eyes of Guadeloupeans, Véronica is a "Marilisse" because of her relationship with Jean-Marie. As Véronica explains to the reader, in Guadeloupe, a Marilisse is a negative female stereotype that embodies the notion of woman as the sex slave / whore whose only function is to sexually please a man in power. Véronica is viewed as a Marilisse because she crossed racial lines when she entered into a romantic / sexual relationship with Jean-Marie. When speaking of her family's history, Véronica informs her reader that she is not the only woman in her family to have had a sexual relationship with a lighter-skinned individual. She tells us that her maternal grandmother was the illegitimate daughter of *un béké* bearing the family name of Sainte-Croix:

On en voyait des Saintes-Croix dans l'allée centrale de la cathédrale, le dimanche. Mais ils ne nous accordaient pas un regard. Je suis sûre qu'ils ignoraient qu'une goutte du sperme de leur aïeul était responsable de notre famille maternelle. Nous, cette goutte, nous l'avions enchâssée, embaumée. Elle était à l'origine du teint relativement clair de ma mère et du nez droit d'Aida. Cette goutte tenace et bienfaisante nous empêchait d'être des négresses *noires comme du charbon* et faisait de nous des *négresses rouges* (*Heremakhonon* 33).

This citation demonstrates the rigidity and the hypocrisy of the island's racially divided society. In addition, the description of the two families sitting on opposite sides of the church is reminiscent of the chapter in *Le coeur* entitled "Amélie." In both instances church is a site for seeing and watching the Other.

While in Paris, Véronica enters into a love affair with Jean-Michel, who is an architect and part of the French bourgeoisie. Similarly, when she arrives in West Africa, she immediately becomes sexually involved with Ibrahima Sory. Indeed the only way that she is significantly committed to or involved with the West African nation is through her sexual relationship with Sory. According to Daniel Morris, "Véronica seeks salvation in the pre-slave African aristocracy from which Ibrahima Sory descends. Although Ibrahima Sory is black, he differs from the blacks of her native Guadeloupe because he has not been stamped by the mark of slavery" (26). Furthermore, Veronica's love affair with Ibrahima Sory emphasizes the patriarchal structure of the newly independent nation, for she learns that power in that society is linked to gender and patriarchal codes. Her realization of this is made clear when she states: "Si je comprends bien, dans ce pays, faire l'amour revient à faire un choix politique" (*Heremakhonon* 106). Later within the narrative, Véronica asks herself, "Est-ce que le chemin de la révolution passe par l'amour d'un homme? Est-ce que c'est l'amour d'un homme qui conduit à l'amour d'une cause?" (*Heremakhonon* 140). Like her own family in Guadeloupe, Sory and his family belong to the upper, privileged classes and thus represent power, prestige, and wealth. Just as with Jean-Marie and Jean-Michel, Véronica has chosen a male companion from a privileged socio-economic background. This time she and her lover share the same skin color. However, Sory is part of the corrupt leadership of the newly independent nation and he is guilty of practicing censorship, murder, and the illegal detention of political rebels from the opposition movement. As the minister of defense, he helps preserve the corrupt dictatorship that is in place. Véronica is apathetic towards the fact that her new lover is

personally responsible for the police violence, corruption, and much of the political chaos of the nation.

### **Veronica's Sterility: Can the Subaltern Speak?**

One of Véronica's defining characteristics is her inability to conceive and bear children. Her sterility serves as a metaphor for the socio-political situation in the newly independent African nation. Véronica's sterility in Africa deconstructs the myth of mother Africa or the image of Africa as a womb for the scattered members of her diaspora. Our protagonist's desire to reconnect with Mother Africa is demonstrated in her own personal reflections: "Je ferme les yeux. Je rentre dans la nuit utérine. Au creux du ventre maternel. Des images imprécises défilent dans ma mémoire de fœtus" (*Heremakhonon* 127). These fictional memories of time spent in the womb serve to dismantle the belief that one can return to a mythical, African utopia. However, Véronica's sterility also means that she can have sexual relations without the burden of becoming pregnant. This fact suggests that she has greater sexual liberation and female agency. In addition, she is also linguistically sterile since the reader is never provided with an example of direct speech from her. As a result, she is portrayed as a silent heroine or a protagonist without a voice. This fact echoes the themes of Spivak's article "Can The Subaltern Speak," in which she argues that there is no free space where marginalized groups have a voice. Ironically, Véronica's voice is nonetheless the essence of the narrative since all of the events of the novel are conveyed to the reader through her interior monologue.

Véronica's biological sterility also echoes and reinforces the (unnamed) African nation's political and socioeconomic stagnation. Like Veronica, the newly independent country is in a state of confusion and uncertainty about the future, national and collective identity, and its relationship with the Hexagon. In the era of independence, that nation strives to situate and reposition itself within the framework of the postcolonial / neo-colonial period. The political chaos of the nation also parallels Véronica's internal chaos, juxtaposing the personal quest of the individual to the collective plight of the nation in its attempt to redefine its own socio-political identity. In search of her past and her pre-colonial ancestors, Véronica has no interest in the contemporary political events happening around her; and as a result, she refuses to become actively engaged in the politics of the nation. Although she has come to West Africa to teach philosophy, she is disinterested in the political engagement and activism of her own students. The fact that they regularly participate in violent demonstrations does not concern her in the least. Her favorite student, Birame III, explained to Véronica that his mission was to "reconstruire un pays que la colonisation a vidé de ses forces" (*Heremakhonon* 102). Yet Véronica's inner thoughts reveal that she believes that her student's mission is ridiculous:

Birame III, de qui parles-tu? Qu'est-ce que tu racontes? Est-ce que tu ne sais pas que l'histoire ne s'est jamais souciée des nègres? Parce que preuves à l'appui, ils n'en valaient pas le coup. Pas trace de leurs doigts sur le Golden Gate, ou la charpente de la tour Eiffel. Au lieu de prier à Notre Dame, ou à Westminster Abbey, ils animaient un bout de bois (*Heremakhonon* 30).

Véronica does not share in her student's desire to construct a country that is economically and politically stable. She refuses to become interested and actively engaged in political

causes even after Birame III is imprisoned, tortured, and murdered by the oppressive government that is in place.

Véronica's apathy is evident upon her arrival in Africa when she states, "La misère, la saleté, ce n'est pas vraiment nouveau pour moi, je les ai contemplés dès ma naissance par la vitre à demi baissée de la voiture de mon père" (*Heremakhonon* 27). This statement not only shows that Véronica's family in Guadeloupe belongs to a privileged class, but it also shows her complete lack of interest in contemporary African society. She is oblivious to the poverty, famine, and drought that are affecting the entire nation. Later, when referring to current events, she says, "Les affaires de l'Etat? L'Etat, c'est moi et rien d'autre" (*Heremakhonon* 133). This allusion to Louis XIV demonstrates her familiarity with French history while showing that she is completely self-absorbed. When discussing Véronica's role in West Africa, Adele King comments that "she wants to find a place for herself in the country yet remain apart" (96).

Although the narrator is a young woman, *Heremakhonon* is characterized by an absence of women. This absence of female figures within the text emphasizes Véronica's solitude as well as the patriarchal structure of the corrupt government that Sory enables to continue and thrive. While in Africa, Véronica only interacts and develops significant relationships with men, which is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's all-male circle of intellectual friends at the Sorbonne. In Véronica's case, Saliou, the supervisor of the high school where she teaches, is her only real friend in Africa, and part of the political opposition that is working to overthrow the regime upheld by Sory. Yet Véronica is completely unmoved by the fact that her lover and her friend are political enemies. Her

isolation is reinforced by the stark reality that no one in Africa is interested in her or her personal quest. The fact that everyone in Africa refers to her as "sister" is an example of Condé's use of irony. This superficial nickname emphasizes the fact that even though they share the same skin color, the cultural gap between Guadeloupean and West African people, in conjunction with Véronica's apathy, make it nearly impossible for her to socially connect with the local population. Unlike the Guadeloupeans, Ibrahima Sory and the rest of his nation have experienced the horrors of French colonization and the violent struggles for independence. Véronica cannot relate to their desire for independence nor can she understand the socio-political difficulties that they face in the neo-colonial / postcolonial era. In contrast to the nations of Africa, Véronica's native island is still an official department of the Hexagon.

Véronica Mercier is marginalized in Guadeloupe, Paris, and in Africa. Paradoxically, her cultural links to all three geographic locations are evident in the rich intertextuality and cultural references that are embedded within the text. Thus, Antillean identity is not limited to one geographic location. Although Véronica is quite educated and well-read, she paradoxically does not know or understand herself. The large quantity of intertextual and cultural references is in sharp contrast to her lack of self-knowledge. When speaking of Véronica's relationship to space and identity, Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa states that "for so long as a person continues to want to exist elsewhere and as someone other than who she is, that person remains absent and voiceless. We need to own both our legacy and our space in order to be" (562). Véronica refers to writers such as Booker T. Washington, and Marivaux. She makes references to a wide range of

literary works including *Andromaque*, *Up From Slavery*, and *Gone With The Wind*. Her cultural knowledge is not just limited to literature, for she also discusses historical events, people, cultural icons, and places such as Venice, the Right Bank of Paris, the Venus de Milos, Mahalia Jackson, Christopher Columbus, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Black Panthers. She also mentions Tegnassu and Agadja, two African kings who sold slaves, a reference that emphasizes that corruption and slavery existed in Africa before the continent was colonized by the West. However, these cultural icons derived from European, American, and African cultures also invite (and assume) a wide and international readership.

Gayatri Spivak identifies three time periods within the narrative that correspond to time spent in Guadeloupe, France, and Africa. According to Spivak, Véronica's relationship to time is represented by "son passé créole individuel, son passé immédiat avec les impérialistes, et son désir d'appréhender d'une manière plus impersonnelle une histoire raciale comme passé / futur" (2002, 73). It is within the intersection of these three time periods that a fourth, hybrid sense of time is established within the literary space of the text. Sory's compound, known as Heremakhonon or the "Welcome House," exists inside of this fourth space. In this way, Heremakhonon is thus a physical place as well as a psychological state of existence for the novel's (anti)heroine. Véronica spends great lengths of time within the no man's land of the compound waiting for Sory to return. Within the exquisite mansion that is situated in one of the most exclusive residential quarters, she avoids the political chaos of the outside world. Away from the manifestations, prisoner of war camps, government corruption, and assassinations that

characterize the nation's daily life, the compound is an oasis and a place of safety and security for her. "Ramenez-moi à Heremakhonon, c'est encore là que je serai le moins mal" (*Heremakhonon* 209). However, the "Welcome House" is also an idea or a state of being within Véronica's psyche. Throughout the narrative there are very few (if any) significant references to the future. The fact that time is represented in discussions of past and present without references to the future suggests that Véronica views her own future with a great deal of uncertainty.

### **Sweeping Away the Colonial Past**

At the beginning and at the end of *Heremakhonon*, Véronica makes reference to a street sweeper in Paris that she used to pass every day on her way to the university. The street sweeper is significant because like Véronica, he is also from the African diaspora. While in Africa, Véronica has dreams about him and is continually haunted by his image. The metaphor suggested by his presence is that of the cleaning, cleansing, and sweeping away of the past and history. His presence is symbolic of the West's desire to sweep away pre-colonial and colonial history. The fact that his work is repetitive also suggests the notion of history repeating itself. Véronica describes what it was like when she and her French lover passed in front of the street sweeper: "Il nous regardait. Moi, mon architecte aux cheveux mi-longs en costume de velours rouille" (*Heremakhonon* 34). Véronica and her lover are watched and seen by the street sweeper in the same way that Maryse in *Le coeur* was watched and seen by Parisians. The vocation of the street sweeper is juxtaposed to that of her French lover, Jean-Michel, who is an architect. The

pre-colonial past of Africa and the Caribbean have been swept away by the West's desire to build and construct colonial empires. As a result, Véronica is haunted by this image while she is in Africa.

At the end of her three-month stay in Africa, Véronica seems to be painfully aware of her own alterity: "Je suis un arum dans un vase; je dis arum, car la plante, comme moi, est exotique. Elle ne pousse pas sous ces cieux" (*Heremakhonon* 151). Similarly, she states that "si je voulais faire la paix avec moi-même, c'est-à-dire avec eux, c'est-à-dire avec nous, c'est chez moi que je devrais retourner. Dans ma poussière d'îles" (*Heremakhonon* 110). Véronica has finally realized that her home and her cultural roots are in Guadeloupe, and that her quest was doomed to fail: "Lucidement je m'aperçois une fois de plus que ce que je venais faire dans ce pays est absurde" (*Heremakhonon* 145). Condé's irony and sarcasm are seen through Véronica's interior monologue: "Où serions-nous si Christophe Colomb n'avait pas traversé l'Océan avec des plants de canne à sucre arrachés aux musulmans de Chypre dans ses cales? La canne à sucre, nous devrions en faire notre emblème, notre étendard" (*Heremakhonon* 32). Véronica's bitterness vis-à-vis her failure to connect with her ancestors is seen when she states, "Mes aïeux, je ne les ai pas trouvés. Trois siècles et demi m'en ont séparée. Ils ne me reconnaissent pas plus que je ne les reconnais. Je n'ai trouvé qu'un homme avec aïeux qui les garde jalousement pour lui seul, qui ne songe pas à les partager avec moi" (*Heremakhonon* 193). Even in the newly independent African nation, Véronica learns that racial discrimination and gender oppression exist in much the same way as in France and in Guadeloupe. This realization marks a powerful turning point in her learning process and personal trajectory.

It is this learning and awareness that makes her journey more of a success than a failure.

While Véronica's identity quest may be read by some critics as a failure, *Heremakhonon* is certainly a literary success. *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* and *Heremakhonon* are texts that belong to and help define the canon of women's Francophone Caribbean literature. While both of these novels reveal the uncertainty of the relationship between Guadeloupe and France in regard to postcoloniality, the nation of Algeria experienced first-hand the struggle for independence and the tedious process of decolonization. Within the context of Islam and the French-speaking Arab world, Chapter 3 will examine the autobiographical expression of Assia Djébar's unfinished Algerian Quartet. Specifically, the next chapter will analyze the cultural framework of colonial and postcolonial Algeria while discussing the way in which Assia Djébar's works are important to the canon of literature written by French-speaking women from the Arab world.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**WRITING, SPACE, AND VISUAL IMAGERY IN**  
**ASSIA DJEBAR'S UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL QUARTET**

"Words could save the person who knew how to string them artfully together. That is what happened to Scheherazade, the author of the thousand and one tales."

Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass* (1994)

**Theorizing Arab Women's Autobiographies**

The autobiographical writings of countless women from the French-speaking Arab world are an important component of the emerging canon of Francophone literary expression. Autobiographical writing has indeed been one of the most authoritative literary genres employed by subaltern groups within colonial and neo-colonial societies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In contrast to non-Western art forms, Western thought and scholarship are traditionally known for the need to place the individual at the center of discourse and artistic expression. Thus, the autobiographical genre itself is often viewed by world audiences as a purely Western form of art. However, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson emphasize that beyond what is considered to be a traditional, Western autobiography, "there are other modes of life story telling, both oral and written, to be recognized, other genealogies of life story telling to be chronicled, other explorations of traditions, current and past, to be factored into the making and unmaking of autobiographical subjects" (xviii). Autobiographical narratives written in French by non-Western Muslim women represent one form of discourse from which scholars can gather information about personal and collective experiences. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed describes the dearth of scholarship pertaining to gender and women's

history in the Arab world and in Muslim societies (2).<sup>46</sup> Ahmed categorizes this void as an “Absence of work attempting to conceptualize women’s history and issues of gender in any Islamic society before the nineteenth century” (2). This chapter will attempt to show how three of Assia Djébar's autobiographical novels - *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), *Ombre sultane* (1987), and *Vaste est la prison* (1995), all of which belong to what is referred to by scholars as her “Algerian” or “autobiographical” quartet, fill some of the void referred to by Leila Ahmed. More specifically, while keeping in mind the autobiographical texts of Beauvoir, Lacoïn, and Condé as presented in earlier chapters, this study will show how, in forming a literary space where the themes of women, writing, history and visual imagery are privileged, Djébar's novels reshape the autobiographical genre within the postcolonial era.

When speaking of Djébar's first autobiographical novel, *L'amour, la fantasia*, Mary Jean Green states that

it is in reconstructing the nineteenth-century French conquest that Djébar makes use of her historical training to analyze a series of documents--memoirs, letters, and newspaper articles--that offer eye witness accounts of French invasion, documents that are, with one exception, written by European men (962).

Similarly, Dominique Lycops explains that “post-colonial and feminist literature and criticism frequently use the tropes of silence and (coming) to voice to describe the accession of (formerly) oppressed people to writing” (45). In her work as a writer and historian, the themes of history and memory are juxtaposed with silence and erasure.

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<sup>46</sup> However, Ahmed does state that some research on the topic began in the late 1980s.

For the Algerian writer and historian Assia Djébar, writing is fundamental to the preservation of both collective and individual history, and is thus simultaneously a method of remembering voices from the past that may have otherwise been forgotten or silenced. Writing, whether it is historical or autobiographical, is a means for Djébar to come to know the self, while simultaneously reconnecting with other Algerian women from whom she has felt separated. In order to write *herstory* while studying and preserving the *history* of Algeria, Djébar has spent countless hours in national archives, excavating and unveiling lost information. Her goal is to uncover the lost and forgotten history of the Maghreb. In *Fiction in the Archives*, Natalie Zemon Davis discusses the historian's relationship to archival research, fiction, and fact: "In the current debate about the relation of the 'real' and the 'historical' to the 'fictional,' I think we can agree with Hayden White that the world does not just 'present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends'" (3). Natalie Davis' description of the challenges of archival work also speaks to many of the artistic and epistemological hurdles encountered by Djébar through her work as a historian, novelist, and filmmaker. The work of the historian is like that of an archaeologist who carefully and painstakingly pieces together the fragmented elements of an unknown past. Djébar's works relate her own experiences as a writer, an historian, and an emancipated, French-speaking Algerian woman while giving a voice to a multitude of women throughout history who would normally be lost in the abyss of the past. However, in writing her autobiographical quartet, Djébar is not practicing the epistemic violence against subaltern women as described in Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can

The Subaltern Speak.” Rather, Djébar, as a historian and novelist, is speaking *with* the women she portrays in her writing as she creates, through literary space, a discursive platform alongside of and wrapped within her own autobiographical narratives. As a result, Djébar does not deny but rather reinforces their socio-cultural legitimacy as speaking subjects. According to Donald Wehrs,

This quasi-maternal relation of writer to interlocutor should not be confused with ‘speaking for’ non-Westernized women, or ‘giving voice’ to what they really mean, for the writer is, like a mother, reshaped, decentered, through the materiality of the Other’s voice, and, again like a mother, the writer lends her words to the Other so as to ‘speak with’ rather than ‘for’ the Other (851).

For Djébar, female collectivity and autobiography are all but inseparable since one’s own story, although unique, is intricately linked with the stories of others. In addition to writing about her own experiences, she writes about Algerian women such as Cherifa and Zohra who fought for their freedom alongside of their male cohorts during the Algerian war. Well-known literary heroines like Scheherazade, the fictional narrator from *One Thousand and One Nights*, are remembered along with the real, historical accounts of women such as Tin Hinan, a Berber princess who lived during the fourth century. In much the same way, the biographies of her own mother and grandmother are intertwined with the stories of countless women from Mount Chenoua in the painful years of reconstruction that followed Algeria’s independence. Mary Jean Green notes that “the first-person narrator of the autobiography joins her voice with that of other Algerian women, and the novel becomes collective autobiography as she finds their story to be her own” (963). As a result, Djébar’s writing can be described as polyphonic since her autobiographical novels consist of many narrative strands that are intricately woven

together. In this way, her writing style deconstructs the Western myths and stereotypes of the universally colonized African woman since so many individual and diverse stories and experiences are presented and intertwined. In addition, Djébar's approach to autobiography works to redefine the very nature, the characteristics, and the limits of the genre. When speaking of Djébar and autobiography, it is also important to note that Djébar was one of the first scholars to bring attention to Saint Augustine's Algerian heritage. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* are cited in an epigraph within her own autobiographical novel *Fantasia*. Thus, her autobiography incorporates this male-authored text that has served as one of the great pillars of the (Western) autobiographical tradition.

Close to 450 million women throughout the world live in Muslim countries and under Muslim Personal Laws or Family Codes which vary greatly depending on the particular region or culture in question (Hélie-Lucas 189). Although Assia Djébar has worked and resided in both Europe and the United States for many years, it is important to keep in mind her rich cultural heritage which has its origins in the mountainous regions of Northern Algeria. Chandra Talpade Mohanty expresses the dangers of scholarship that reduces Arab and Muslim cultures and countries to homogeneous groups while simultaneously disregarding the cultural and political specificities of each region and society. Mohanty opposes the way in which some Western feminists have constructed what is often understood to be the "average" or "universal" Third World Woman, and she denounces scholarly discourses that promote what she refers to as cultural reductionism (66). According to Mohanty, "The re-presentation of Woman produced by hegemonic

discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures” (53). Mohanty’s writings about the West’s (re)presentation of Third World women echo Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in which he identifies the Orient as a space invented by Europeans. Said describes the Orient as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1).

In many Western feminist discourses, “the” Third World woman is stereotypically viewed as sexually constrained, poor, uneducated, traditional, family-oriented, and victimized (Mohanty 56). These binary, Manichean categories of Western / and non-Western women are not only reductive but also deny them legitimacy as subjects. Thus, women from the non-Western regions of the globe are not only compared to men within the dominant discourses as a result of their gender, but they are also compared as one large, homogeneous group to Western women. When speaking of the cultural clash between East and West, Leila Amhed states that “although Western feminists have succeeded in rejecting their culture’s myths about (Western) women and their innate inferiority and irrationality, they continue to subscribe to and perpetuate myths about Muslims, including Muslim women” (1982, 526).

Since the West has historically positioned itself as the cultural standard / center, while other cultures and societies that deviate from the center are portrayed as inferior, Third World feminist scholarship aims to deconstruct and dismantle the Western notion of the homogeneous woman of the Third World. In *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms*, Chilla Bulbeck explains that “within the West, both indigenous women and Diaspora

women from Asian and so-called third world countries have conducted a critique of the ‘whiteness’ of Western feminism” (2). She further adds that “white Western feminists are now beginning to see themselves as particularized in terms of their ethnicity or culture through a growing interest in ‘other’ women” (Bulbeck 4). Autobiographical writing is a means of breaking the silence that characterizes quotidian life of many women from the Maghreb and other regions of the globe colonized by the French. For women from the Arab world, writing autobiographically is to unveil the self in the most intimate manner. According to Magda Al-Nowaihi,

On the surface, an autobiography appears to be a celebration of the achievements and accomplishments of its writer, an act of narcissism announcing that one’s character and life are worth of sharing with the world. Yet an honest autobiography inevitably exposes aspects of one’s life and character that are not entirely praiseworthy and often becomes an exploration of vulnerability and loss (478).

Thus, one of the greatest challenges for the autobiographer is to represent moments of weakness, pain, failure, and vulnerability. When speaking of the theme of silence and Assia Djebar’s autobiographical writing, Al-Nowaihi explains that “the author-narrator is empowered to break a silence that had lasted for a long time and to write in a new way that challenges and reconfigures the masculine aesthetic expectations that had consciously or unconsciously stifled her” (478). In traditional Algerian society, the act of publishing an autobiographical text is to violate the *huddud* or the sacred frontier between private and public space. Thus, the act of writing is a personal as well as a sociopolitical activity of agency and emancipation that challenges patriarchal social structures. In addition, women in Algeria are not allowed to refer to themselves using “I” (Best 878). Al-Nowaihi characterizes autobiographical writing as “both a private activity crucial for

analyzing, understanding, and maybe even reinventing the self, and a public activity that enables them to interact with and re-create the world around them” (478). This chapter will show how Djébar’s writing attempts to avoid the pitfalls mentioned by Mohanty and Ahmed, and how she reinvents herself within literary space and circumvents the social taboo of referring to the self with the personal pronoun of “I”.

### **Assia Djébar and Autobiography: An Archaeology of the Self**

Autobiographical expression, like archaeology, is a tedious reconstruction of past events as the writer must retrieve cultural memory on both a collective and individual basis. To delve into one’s memory is much like embarking on an archaeological excavation, for to write autobiographically is to uncover and reveal the self and one’s own buried past. Assia Djébar’s practice of autobiographical writing is emblematic of the genre as she rediscovers and retrieves buried information, fills in the blanks, and pieces together past events. For any woman, regardless of her culture, to write autobiographically is to expose the private Self and Other(s). Female collectivity and pluralism are characteristics that define (Arab) women’s writing. As a result, an autobiographical text that contains the stories of several individuals can be viewed as a polyphonic literary site. In order for Djébar to tell her own story, she must also relate the lives of her mother, grandmother, other women from her village, women who fought in the Algerian war, and countless women throughout Algeria’s history.

In June 2005 Assia Djébar became the first writer from the Maghreb to join the Académie Française. This honor seems more than appropriate given her special interest

in the preservation of writing, language, and history. Assia Djébar is a writer, historian, translator, professor, and filmmaker. In addition to her multiple publications, Djébar has composed her own music and produced two films. A trained historian, she is primarily interested in the relationship between Maghrebi women and history. Her research includes the study of the Maghreb during the pre-Islamic era. According to Nancy Von Rosk, “Djébar’s work has much to teach us about a critical identity politics, and about the complicated cultural and historical processes behind terms like postcolonial subject, and postcolonial identity” (67). Like Maryse Condé, Assia Djébar is also interested in Africa's pre-colonial history. Specifically, Djébar focuses on the way that Arab and Muslim women experience history. Djébar’s writing is often a critique of the way that Algerian history has been portrayed by the West and the non-West. She also denounces the male-centered historiography that does not include the efforts and contributions of women throughout Algeria’s long and tedious national history. In her writings, she criticizes both Orient and Occident for excluding Maghrebi women from historical narratives. Djébar also finds fault with the lack of female historians and thus the absence of female-authored historical narratives. Prior to the twentieth century, much of Algeria’s history was written by male historians from Europe.

Assia Djébar was born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen in Cherchell, Algeria in 1936, just one year before Maryse Condé. Like Maryse Condé, Djébar was also the daughter of a school teacher in the French colonial school system. Unlike Condé, Beauvoir, and Lacoïn, Assia Djébar did not grow up within the social arena of the bourgeoisie. However, Djébar enjoyed the cultural and linguistic diversity that was the result of

having an Arab father and a mother who was Berber, and as we will see later, her father played an important role in her education as she describes the life-altering day when he took her by the hand and led her to the French colonial school for Algerian boys where he taught. The influence of her father vis-à-vis her education is not unlike that of Simone de Beauvoir and her own father, who oversaw Simone's early education. After passing her baccalaureate, Djébar became, in 1955, the first Algerian woman to be accepted to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Sèvres. Later, she earned a doctoral degree in Literature at the Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier.

In 1958 Djébar married (and later divorced) Ahmed Ould-Rouis who was an active member of the Algerian Resistance. In 1957 she published her first novel, *La soif*, and used the pseudonym *Assia Djébar* for the first time. As Ching Selaou explains, "Djébar s'est d'abord servie du pseudonyme comme d'un voile, un voile lui permettant de non seulement changer son identité pour la publication de *La soif*, mais aussi de la cacher" (135). In 1962 she taught theater, film, and history at the University of Algiers. In the 1970s she began to study classical Arabic in order to enhance her cultural and linguistic knowledge. In 1996 she won the Neustadt Prize, and in 1997 she received Le Prix Yourcenar. During the 1980s, Djébar moved to Paris to work at the Center for Algerian Culture. From 1997 to 2001 she worked as a professor and Director of the Center for French and Francophone Studies at the Louisiana State University. Since the fall of 2001, Djébar has been Silver Chair Professor of French and Francophone Studies at New York University.

After Algeria gained independence, Djébar received harsh criticism from her compatriots for writing in French at a time when Algerians were working to reinstate Arabic as the only official, national language. Unlike many nations of postcolonial Africa, Algeria does not recognize French as an official language. Djébar does not support this reality, believing that French and Berber should be allowed an official status as national languages in postcolonial Algeria. Djébar denounces the FLN's advocacy of an Arab-Muslim government that ignores the Berber heritage, which is an important cornerstone of the nation's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic social fabric. Many of her close friends and cohorts have been assassinated by Islamic terrorists as a result of their political views. Her novel *Le blanc de l'Algérie* is a eulogy to these friends and colleagues who died prematurely due to acts of political violence and terrorism.

When speaking of Muslim women's responses to and strategies for coping with Islamic fundamentalism, Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas states that "many women's groups in Muslim countries and communities devote time to research their feminist ancestors, not only in an effort to recover their own history as women, but also in vain hope of stopping accusations of Westernization by rightists, and in quest for their legitimacy" (193). This is exactly what Djébar accomplishes through her work as a historian and autobiographer. Many of her works focus on colonization and the impact that the violence of the Algerian war had on women and children. After the war, Djébar discovered that a code of silence reigned among women and children who found it all but impossible to convey the trauma and horrors that characterized their daily lives. This is one of the reasons why feminist scholars have identified Djébar's novel *L'amour, la fantasia* as a "successful bridge

between Western feminism and the experiences and philosophies of women living beyond the United States and Europe” (Steadman 173).

One of Djébar’s goals as a writer and filmmaker is to give a voice to women who otherwise have no other way of making their stories known to the world. As Steadman also notes, “By reconstructing the history of female revolutionaries, Djébar revises continuing stereotypes of Arab women as helpless, passive victims” (186). Memory, both collective and individual, plays a powerful role in Djébar’s writing. In her literary world, past and present, history and fiction are intertwined and, as we will see later, one of her trademarks as a writer is her ability to infuse her texts with other art forms such as music, photography, film, and painting. Her work can thus be characterized as an artistic and linguistic crossroads that links the written text to the sound and visual images of the motion picture screen.

In her novels Djébar explores the struggle for subaltern female subjects of the Third World who experience a double marginalization because of their gender and for their status as colonized individuals. Like other well-known feminists of the non-West such as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Assia Djébar’s feminism works to deconstruct the images, stereotypes, and discourses of European and American feminisms that tend to portray Arab women in a manner that is unfavorable and inaccurate. Sherin Saadallah defines Muslim feminism as “a discourse engaging with Islamic sources while reconciling Islamic faith with international human rights”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Saadallah makes a distinction between *Muslim feminism*, *Islamist feminism*, and *Secular feminism*. Islamist feminism is defined by Saadallah as discourse emerging from the socially and intellectually

(218). Saadallah further explains that Muslim feminism is a “quest for equality, equity and empowerment within an Islamic context” (219). Djébar’s strong commitment to female agency and empowerment has earned her worldwide recognition from both Muslim and non-Muslim feminists.

Djébar’s novels and films are of particular interest to feminist scholars because of her commitment to bring women’s experiences from the margins into the center of Algeria’s collective national history. Like many feminists from the Arab Muslim world, Djébar discusses the origins of Islam and the many changes that have occurred over time, especially in regard to gender roles. Early Islamic practices called for equality between men and women. It is only much later that radical, fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic texts emerged. Soheila Kiam explains that “si une société est moderne et développée, c’est la femme qui reflète cette image. Au contraire, le fanatisme d’une société sera projeté et représenté par la femme de cette société” (104). Djébar’s literary works focus on women and their relationship to Islam, their struggle for social equality and emancipation from patriarchal social codes. When speaking of Assia Djébar, Anjali Prabhu points out that “there is an eagerness to hail Djébar as a feminist writer who effectively questions various masculinist discourses within and beyond nationalist ones through themes of sisterhood, women’s autobiography, and collectivity” (87).

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conservative Islamist movement, Al Harakah Al-Islamiyya. Secular feminism is defined by Saadallah as a discourse grounded outside of religion and engaged with international human rights. (Saadallah 218).

### Language, Autobiography, and “le lent scalpel de l’autopsie à vif”

Much like the writing of Maryse Condé, the literary space created by Djébar can be characterized as a site of postcolonial cultural hybridity or a fusing together of the languages and cultures of the Orient and the West. As a result, languages, both modern and ancient, play a central role in her writing. Just as Condé infuses her writing with Creole, Djébar’s narratives in French are embedded with words from Arabic and Berber. However, while Condé disobeyed and alienated her mother by writing in the “forbidden” Creole language of the lower classes, Djébar’s use of Arabic and Berber brings her closer to her mother, grandmother, and other female relatives. Nonetheless, writing autobiographically and in French, still posed several epistemological and cultural problems for Djébar. In *Vaste est la prison*, she explains that “longtemps, j’ai cru qu’écrire c’était mourir, mourir lentement. Déplier à tâtons un linceul de sable ou de soie sur ce que l’on a connu piaffant, palpitant. L’éclat de rire—gelé. Le début du sanglot—pétrifié” (*Prison* 11). While the writer may experience a metaphorical death when writing in the language of the colonizer, she is also revived and thus re-born through her writing.

Ever since the life-altering day when her father took her by the hand at the age of four and led her to the French school in their small Algerian village, writing has played a central role in Djébar's life. This episode is described in the opening of *L’amour, la fantasia*: “Fille arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école, un matin d’automne, main dans la main du père” (*Fantasia* 11). The central role that her father played in her education is much like the role played by Georges de Beauvoir as he encouraged and

oversaw Simone's education. Like Simone de Beauvoir, Djébar's education in the French colonial school in Algeria came with many social and intellectual rewards. At the same time, however, her knowledge of the colonizer's language made her feel at times ostracized from other Algerian women, even within her own family. As Mildred Mortimer explains, "She came to believe that the process of Western acculturation, resulting in her mastery of the colonizer's language and access to public space, excluded her from most, if not all, aspects of traditional woman's world" (1997, 102). We have already seen in Chapters 1 and 2 how Beauvoir, Lacoïn, and Condé found themselves outside of their own social class as a result of their education and their identities as intellectuals. In much the same way, Djébar's education and her knowledge of French kept her away from the life within the harem which caused her to feel ostracized from other Algerian women.

For an Algerian woman, the act of making public her private experiences and sentiments is a daring cultural transgression. In the traditional, gendered society of Algeria where there are clear dividing lines between public and private space, to write autobiographically is to violate cultural codes that are inseparable from gender. According to Mildred Mortimer,

Subjectivity in life and fiction are transgressions in Algerian culture. Unlike Western civilization which, Foucault reminds us in his *Histoire de la sexualité*, delights in the public airing of all private matters—desires, sins, suffering—Islamic culture is bound to the non-dire, or unspoken, in other words, to silence; it prohibits personal disclosure (1997, 103).

Beth Gales further explains the dangers that autobiographical texts written in French can pose for a woman from the Arab world: "L'autobiographie écrite en français représente

une transgression encore plus grave. Elle montre plus que le corps: elle fait revivre le passé d'oppression auquel la langue est associée, et rouvre les blessures" (530). Djébar's adoption of her pseudonym in 1957 represents one way of responding to the transgression of female subjectivity; we will see later how the narrator she called "Isma" provided her with another veil of protection.

In order to confront her sentiments of alienation from other Maghrebi women, Djébar first turned to filmmaking, and later to autobiographical writing. When she began to write autobiographically she had to struggle with the knowledge that she was writing in the language of the colonists or the European Other, an act that was at once liberating and confining. As the narrator of *Fantasia* explains,

Tenter l'autobiographie par les seuls mots français, c'est, sous le lent scalpel de l'autopsie à vif, montrer plus que sa peau. Sa chair se desquame, semble-t-il, en lambeaux du parler d'enfance qui ne s'écrit plus. Les blessures s'ouvrent, les veines pleurent, coule le sang de soi et des autres, qui n'a jamais séché (*Fantasia* 224).

This citation reveals the internal conflict experienced by Djébar when she wrote autobiographically in the language of the colonial Other.

From a stylistic point of view, Djébar is known for modifying the French language to give it a structure similar to Arabic and Berber. When speaking of Djébar and language use, Jane Hiddleston states that she "presents feminine experience as both endlessly variable and impossible to access and define using the French, colonial language" (92). Djébar's writing is characterized by smooth, flowing sentences with musical qualities that often incorporate vocabulary from quotidian and literary Arabic and Berber. References to love, desire, the body, and female sexuality are intertwined

with images of war, colonial aggression, and domestic violence. Words that suggest spatial frontiers such as “veil,” “barrier,” and “threshold” are scattered throughout the novel. Their continual presence semantically reinforces the notion and dimensions of social space, gender, and culture in contemporary Algeria. One technique frequently employed by Djébar is the use of italics within her texts. In Djébar’s writing, italics are used to reveal intimate and private thoughts, signaling to the reader that another veil or layer is being lifted. Thus, even the physical and linguistic spaces of the novel’s pages have clear dividing lines. Finally, oral tradition as well as the music from the mountainous regions of Kabylia also play a vital role in her written discourse.

### **Writing as Erasure and Rediscovery**

In the first and third novels of the autobiographical quartet, *L'amour la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison*, the act or process of giving birth to and preserving writing is juxtaposed to the historical destruction and erasure of languages and writing. Thus, writing about contemporary and ancient writing(s) is a central theme of Djébar’s works, establishing an auto-referential dimension within her narrative. Both *L'amour, la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison* possess an auto-referential quality since they focus in part on the creation or the process of writing as well as a writer's undertaking of an autobiographical project. Thus, both autobiographical texts discuss the significance and meaning of self-narratives and life-writing. Djébar reminds her readers that while writings are destroyed, lost and forgotten, they are also created, re-discovered, and resurrected. This intersection of the creation and destruction of writing that is found

within her autobiography, parallels and reinforces the breaking of patriarchal and colonial structures and the rebuilding and re-defining of the Algerian nation in the post or neo-colonial era.

In *L'amour, la fantasia*,<sup>48</sup> writing is primarily evoked through the act of composing, sending, and receiving letters that were written in French. There are several types of epistolary correspondence present within the novel including letters sent by cloistered Algerian girls to men throughout the Arab world, love letters received by the narrator herself during her adolescent years, and letters sent to women in France by French soldiers in Algeria during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, letters belong to the autobiographical genre, and often serve as sources of information for writers when constructing autobiographical texts. Thus, within this autobiographical work, there exists a second literary genre in the form of letters or personal correspondence. Furthermore, the epistolary genre, wrapped within Djébar's own autobiography, is not only autobiographical, but biographical and historical in nature. This exchange of letters contributes to the novel's "fantasia," for the epistles within Djébar's intricate narrative are written, sent, received, read, hidden, stolen, catalogued in national archives, destroyed, and in some cases, reconstructed.

While the theme of writing in *L'amour, la fantasia* is most often evoked through the exchange of letters written in French, writing in *Vaste est la prison* is most often found on hard surfaces such as stone or on materials other than paper such as the narrator's amulets. Furthermore, the writing that is featured in *Vaste est la prison* is in

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<sup>48</sup> 1: A free usually instrumental composition not in strict form 2: A work (as a poem or play) in which the author's fancy roves unrestricted b: Something possessing grotesque, bizarre, or unreal qualities

Arabic and Berber rather than in French. In both novels, writing connects the history of the past to the present and the future, and thus serves as an act of personal and collective agency and a way of breaking through the various prisons that have worked to silence the female voice. As she makes public the once-private self through her own personal narratives, this Algerian autobiographer simultaneously writes herself into the literary history of the twentieth century. Or, as the narrator of *L'amour, la fantasia* asks, "Ecrire, n'est-ce pas 'me' dire"? (87).

As Zahia Smail Salhi explains, "For Assia Djébar, writing is a form of direct action, of bearing witness, of commitment, and transgression. Above all, her writing is intended to give voice to those who are forgotten by official forms of discourse, the marginalized, betrayed, and forgotten women of Islam, whom it urges to advance with defiance, anger, and hope" (29). However, Nancy Von Rosk explains that "while she realizes like Cixous that language can be a liberating tool, and she hopes to reach that inexhaustible silence, that lost 'silent mother,' [Djébar] realizes in another very Derridean sense that writing will always bring her to the brink of incompleteness, a haunting absence" (71).

### **Letters: Writing on Paper in *L'amour, la fantasia***

The writing and sending of letters is a leitmotif found throughout *L'amour, la fantasia*, for the various plots as well as most of Djébar's discussions of writing in this novel are centered around the exchange of letters: "Si la jeune fille écrit? Sa voix, en dépit du silence, circule. Un papier. Un chiffon froissé. Une main de servante, dans le

noir. Un enfant au secret. Le gardien devra veiller jour et nuit. L'écrit s'envolera par le patio, sera lancé d'une terrasse" (*Fantasia* 11). This citation evokes the danger that writing poses for women. The presence of several types of letters or correspondence give the novel a significant epistolary dimension. Furthermore, writing in *L'amour, la fantasia* is most often in French or the "language of the colonizers" while the forms of writing that are discussed in *Vaste est la prison* are in French, Berber, Punic, and Arabic. According to Mildred Mortimer, the oral tradition of Berber within Djébar's works is most often feminine and associated with women's discourse while written narratives are usually in French and thus associated with the male gender (1997, 104).

The writing and sending of letters is a common theme of female-authored autobiographies of the twentieth century. In the chapter entitled "Three Cloistered Girls," Djébar relates the story of three playmates from her childhood who secretly wrote and sent letters to men throughout the Arab world from behind the walls of the family harem. We learn that the three girls are the daughters of the Sheik and the only Muslim girls in their village who have attended primary school. As Djébar notes, "Toute vierge savante saura écrire, écrira à coup sûr 'la' lettre. Viendra l'heure pour elle où l'amour qui s'écrit est plus dangereux que l'amour séquestré" (*Fantasia* 11). This citation emphasizes the notion that writing is a gendered activity that has been historically reserved for men, and that it is dangerous for a young woman to write and send a love letter. Unlike the three girls who are unable to leave their father's home, the secret letters they write can travel the world, carrying the voices of these three feminine authors. The nomadic nature of the letters is juxtaposed to the immobility of the girls behind the closed doors of the harem.

When speaking of women, writing and personal freedom, Djébar states: "L'écrit s'envolera par le patio, sera lancé d'une terrasse" (*Fantasia* 12); "Mes missives en langue française partent pour ailleurs. Elles tentent de circonscrire cet enfermement" (*Fantasia* 86). Thus, for the daughters of the Sheik, writing letters represents a way of breaking through the walls of the prison that kept them physically confined. As the narrator explains, "Les jeunes filles cloîtrées écrivaient; écrivaient des lettres; des lettres à des hommes; à des hommes aux quatre coins du monde; du monde arabe naturellement" (*Fantasia* 21). The secret letter-writing campaign of the three cloistered girls reminds us of Elisabeth Lacoïn's secret epistolary correspondence with Hans Miller and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Djébar's narrator describes how she and the youngest sister opened a locked bookcase belonging to the girl's brother. The narrator explains:

Au cours de ce même été, la benjamine et moi avons pu ouvrir la bibliothèque—celle du frère absent et qui jusque-là avait été fermée à clef. Il travaille en qualité d'interprète au Sahara, qui nous paraît aussi loin que les Amériques. En un mois, nous lisons tous les romans entassés pêle-mêle: Paul Bourget, Colette et Agatha Christie. Nous découvrons un album de photographies érotiques et, dans une enveloppe, des cartes postales d'Ouled-Naïls alourdies de bijoux, les seins nus (*Fantasia* 20).

The narrator explains how they felt after opening the bookcase: "Nous nous imaginons surgir d'une région interdite; nous nous sentons plus vieilles" (*Fantasia* 21). This episode is reminiscent of the forbidden books that Simone and Elisabeth read during their adolescent years. In the case of Djébar and her playmate, the girls had a secret access to novels that contained written words and visual images that were officially off limits.

This access to the brother's forbidden words and images played a significant role in the narrator's coming of age.

At the age of seventeen, Djébar received a letter that was sent to her by a secret admirer at school. Much like Elisabeth Lacoïn's mother, Djébar's father was furious. He tore up the letter and threw the fragments in the waste basket. Djébar explains that "indécence de la demande aux yeux du père, comme si les préparatifs d'un rapt inévitable s'amorçaient dans cette invite" (*Fantasia* 12). However, that which is forbidden and off limits is always a source of curiosity and desire. Consequently, the adolescent Djébar pulled the fragments from the waste-paper basket and painstakingly pieced them back together. This scene is not different from her work as a historian piecing together the lost episodes of Algeria's painful and violent national history. This episode demonstrates the power associated with women and writing. Whether a woman is composing a text or reading the written narrative of another, writing is considered to be a source of independence and knowledge as well as a potential danger.

Another bold example of letter writing occurs during Djébar's childhood when her father sends a postcard to her mother when he is away in a neighboring province. Djébar explains that in the Algerian society of her childhood, husbands and wives did not refer to each by using their first names. Rather, when speaking of her husband, Djébar's mother always employed the personal pronoun in Arabic that corresponded to "him." When her mother began to learn French, she started to refer to her husband as "mon mari" in the same way as the French women who lived in the neighborhood. Thus, her mother's limited knowledge of French made it possible for her to refer to her husband in a manner

that was not allowed in Arabic. Furthermore, it was not the custom for husbands and wives to send letters to one another. Regardless of these social customs, her father wrote a postcard to his wife in French in which he referred to her by her name! The fact that the postcard is written in French, rather than in Arabic, suggests that the language of the colonizer opened up social practices that were normally forbidden. Unlike a letter whose message is protected within the safety of an envelope, a postcard is open or unveiled. Thus as the postcard travels, its message is exposed to any number of readers before it reaches its final destination. Djebbar describes how the women in her mother's family were shocked that her father had not addressed the postcard to his son:

La révolution était manifeste: mon père, de sa propre écriture, et sur une carte qui allait voyager de ville en ville, qui allait passer sous tant et tant de regards masculins, y compris pour finir celui du facteur de notre village, un facteur musulman de surcroît, mon père donc avait osé écrire le nom de sa femme qu'il avait désigné à la manière occidentale (*Fantasia* 57).

Without a doubt, the postcard represented a significant social transgression, for this level of exchange was considered to be an inappropriate display of intimacy within a couple. The private life of the couple was written on the postcard for all the world to see. However, Djebbar's mother was pleased and full of pride with the knowledge that her husband had written to her in this manner, because this gesture demonstrated mutuality, gender equality, and love.

Since letters and postcards are nomadic, one never knows exactly where a letter will go. Furthermore, letters are meant to travel at times when their author cannot, and are usually sent out into the world to an intended reader. This is made clear when the narrator's husband sends her an intimate letter in which he expresses his love and desire.

This episode is not unlike the postcard sent by Djébar's father to her mother. What is even more significant is what happens to the love letter after it is read; the narrator describes how she put the letter in her purse where it is later removed, read and put back by another man who makes unwanted romantic advances to her. Later, the letter is also stolen from its owner, along with her purse, by a beggar woman in the street. These two episodes show that letters can be removed, stolen or stripped from their owners just like sacred writings or archaeological treasures.

Letters from the nineteenth century written by French soldiers to their families in France described the brutal and violent invasion of Algeria. It is through the collection of letters, personal journals, and travel logs, that are now housed in the various national archives throughout France, that Djébar the historian learned about the events that occurred when the French captured Algeria. She spent countless hours in the archives reading the chronicles written by Frenchmen in order to piece together the events of Algeria's turbulent past. The letters reveal the death, destruction, bloodshed, suffering and massacre that occurred in the years following the arrival of the French in Algeria in 1830: "Leurs mots, couchés dans des volumes perdus aujourd'hui dans des bibliothèques, présentent la trame d'une réalité 'monstre'" (*Fantasia* 84). Captain Bosquet's letters from the expedition of 1840 describe war, rape, and violence such as the deaths of seven women who were killed by French soldiers because they had verbally insulted them. Another letter tells of a woman whose ankle was cut in order to retrieve a gold bracelet. These letters that were written more than a century ago, reveal the carnage and brutality of colonization.

### **Naming Algeria: Writing on Stone in *Vaste est la prison***

While Djébar primarily evokes the French language and the inherent nomadism of the epistolary genre in *l'amour, la fantasia*, writing in *Vaste est la prison* is most often inscribed on objects rather than on paper, such as the bilingual stele<sup>49</sup> from Dougga and the narrator's amulets given to her by her maternal grandmother. Furthermore, contrary to the writings in *L'amour, la fantasia*, the writings featured in *Vaste est la prison* are in non-Western languages such as Berber and Arabic rather than in French. Andrea Flores explains that the core challenge of this third autobiographical volume is “how to name Algeria and how to write about the Algerian self who speaks and writes in French” (249). Djébar's re-writing of and self-inscription within history gives the historical accounts in both novels a palimpsest-like quality. Finally, the novel privileges the themes of archaeology, removal, preservation, and destruction. Although the stele and the amulets that are removed are “stripped” from their owners, they are not necessarily destroyed or lost.

The themes of the destruction and preservation of writing are juxtaposed to the narrator's adulterous affair that leads to the end of her marriage. The narrative of the failed marriage and love affair is interspersed with the historical account of the description of the removal of the bilingual stele from Dougga.<sup>50</sup> As Andrea Flores explains, “Both the ruin of the heart and the stone's fragmented materiality allow for a stylistic coherence of dismemberment and a sentiment of mourning” (237). In 1631, a

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<sup>49</sup> Both “Stele” and “Stela” are used in English: A carved or inscribed stone slab or pillar used for commemorative purposes.

<sup>50</sup> Dougga is a city located in Northern Tunisia, 110 kilometers southwest of Tunis and what is known as ancient Carthage.

stele containing two distinct alphabets is discovered by a Frenchman during an archaeological expedition. Although one of the writings is identified as Punic, the other is unidentifiable and will remain a mystery to Western scholars for two more centuries. In 1842 the stele is removed from Tunisia by the consul general of England and sold to the British museum for a mere five pounds! The stele, which had to be cut in two pieces, was removed barbarically by the team of unskilled workers. As a result, much of the mausoleum and the surrounding statues were destroyed. According to Flores, “The mausoleum—a prominent motif in the novel—is a site of mourning, of pre-colonial memory reduced, through Western scientific endeavors and excavations, to a pile of bits and pieces” (240). Like the Rosetta stone, the bilingual stele found at Dougga fuses together two cultures, for it is engraved with more than one language: the other mysterious writing, which baffled linguists and historians for years, is finally identified as an ancient Lybico-Berber language. This discovery is significant since Berber was previously believed by Western scholars to be exclusively oral in nature. Just like the letters sent by the cloistered Algerian girls to all corners of the globe, the stele and the languages it contained traveled abroad. Given this brutal removal of writing on stone, Algeria was stripped of her archaeology, history and sacred writing as a result of the greed and hegemony of the West. As Rachid Aadnani explains, by writing about the stele from Dougga, Djébar “Highlights linguistics elements that are always omitted in North Africa: *Tamazight* the language, and its ancient alphabet *Tifinagh*. The novel re-inserts these two elements in the vast space extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the Egyptian desert” (144).

### Stripped of Words

While the removal of the bilingual stele represents a collective loss, Djébar also describes a loss of writing that she experienced as a child. At the age of six, her own mother, fearing that her daughter would be ridiculed at school, removed traditional amulets from her daughter's body. The amulets consisted of two squares and one triangle that contained holy writings from the Koran. A gift from her grandmother, they were a symbol of protection from the envy of others. As a young child, our narrator wore these jewels day and night. While she attended the French school, the amulets served as a daily reminder of her Arab and Berber origins. Since the amulets were a gift from her grandmother, the child felt that part of her grandmother was always with her:

Ces parures de soie, avec leurs couleurs mates, gris, bleu foncé et noir, me 'protégeaient'. . . Je m'endormais préservée, comme si l'aïeule demeurait près de moi. Et durant le jour, sans que mes condisciples le sachent, j'étais, malgré elles, sous une protection seconde: un œil invisible et ancien qui, de loin, me couvrait (*Prison* 287).

Ironically, her mother believed that *she* was protecting her daughter from prejudice at school, for she did not want the French girls to perceive her as "pagan" or marginal. However, Djébar describes how she felt stripped and naked once her mother removed the magical, protective amulets. This incident is parallel to the removal of the stele from Dougga: just like the nation of Algeria, our narrator is stripped of the Koranic writing on the stone surface of her amulets.

The young narrator is not the only woman to experience a removal of writing that is cherished and sacred. We are told that her mother's most prized possession was the music she had written down in several notebooks during her adolescent years. Those

books contained the poetry in Arabic of the *noubas*, or songs of Andalusia which had been passed down orally by Algerian women for generations. During the Algerian War, French soldiers entered the family's apartment and destroyed Djébar's mother's books of music. She describes this intrusion as a "violent attack on writing" similar to the ruin that occurred at Dougga. This loss of writing and of music was also an attack on women's artistic expression and language, for these writings represented the collective memory of several generations of female relatives that had been passed down through oral tradition. While writing in Djébar's literary world is found on the hard surfaces of steles, mausoleums, cenotaphs, and amulets, written words are also found on the soft paper of her mother's music books, on love letters, and in travel narratives preserved within the French national archives. Writing thus comes in many forms and from many sources and time periods; as contemporary writing on paper is juxtaposed to ancient writing on stone, and many languages such as Punic, Berber, Arabic, and French are used.

### **The Sultana and Her Shadow: Isma and Hajila**

Contemporary Algerian society is divided into space along gender lines. Jane Hiddleston emphasizes the fact that Djébar's writing is influenced by the strict gender roles that divide and define Algerian society. The theme of space—whether it be domestic, public, private, personal, intellectual, literary, female or male—is a core component of Djébar's writing, as the following section will show in elucidating her use and portrayal of space in *Ombre sultane* and *Vaste est la prison*.

Written in 1987, *Ombre sultane*, the second novel in Djébar's quartet, is an autobiographical text inspired by the legendary, fictional account of Scheherazade and her sister Dinarzade from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>51</sup> Through the juxtaposition and the intersection of the lives of two women, Isma and Hajila, both married to the same man<sup>52</sup>, Djébar's novel *Ombre sultane* explores how a woman's social class, family, language, and education can determine her level of social emancipation and the way that she exists within (or outside of) public and private space. Within *Ombre sultane*, Isma and Hajila mirror the relationship between Scheherazade and Dinarzade, for each woman relies on the other for survival. Thus, within this second novel of the autobiographical quartet, Djébar includes a well-known narrative from the literary history of the Orient. *Ombre sultane* privileges the themes of women, autobiography, and collectivity, for the text is also about other women close to Isma and Hajila such as Meriem, Houria, Kenza, and Touma. Translated into English as *A Sister to Scheherazade*, the novel references the complicity between the legendary sisters Dinarzade and Scheherazade. *Ombre sultane*, much like *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, highlights the themes of women, storytelling, language, space, power, and gender. The novel opens with the omniscient narrator Isma as she explains:

Ombre et sultane; ombre derrière la sultane. Deux femmes: Hajila et Isma. Le récit que j'esquisse cerne un duo étrange: deux femmes qui ne sont point sœurs, et même rivales, bien que, l'une le sachant et l'autre l'ignorant, elles se soient retrouvées épouses du même homme—

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<sup>51</sup> Also referred to erroneously as *Arabian Nights*. The work is a collection of short stories spanning more than a thousand years and written by various authors, translators, and scholars. An original manuscript has never been found. Several versions of the collection of tales date the work as a whole to 800 and 900 AD. The tales come from across the Orient including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.

<sup>52</sup> Isma was married to him first and then obtained a divorce. Hajila is the second wife.

‘l’Homme’ pour reprendre en écho le dialecte arabe qui se murmure dans la chambre. . . Cet homme ne les sépare pas, ne les rend pas pour autant complices (*Ombre* 9).

One of the central questions of the novel is who is the Sultana and who is the Shadow?

Isma and Hajila represent the autobiographical self and the fictional self respectively. Hajila is introduced to the reader as a woman who is veiled, traditional, and restricted to the private space of the home. In contrast to Isma, she only exists within the confines of the text. Hajila is nonetheless essential to the narrative, for she allows Isma to come to terms with her buried past. The narrator Isma, exists beyond the written text, and she has direct biographical ties to Assia Djébar herself. At times, her story bears a striking resemblance to that of Djébar, while Hajila is presented as her antithesis. Specifically, she represents the way in which Djébar imagined what her life might have been had she been confined to the walls of a harem. Isma is also presented as an omniscient autobiographical voice in *Vaste est la prison*: “Appellerai-je à nouveau la narratrice Isma?” (*Prison* 331). The presence of an autobiographical narrator allows Djébar to circumvent some of the cultural dilemmas associated with gender, the Arab world, and autobiographical writing. By naming her “Isma,” rather than “Assia Djébar” or “Fatima-Zohra Imalayen,” Djébar creates a female literary figure who serves as an intermediary between the “I” within the texts, the woman known as Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, and the author / historian Assia Djébar. In this way, the autobiographical intermediary known as “Isma” functions like a veil between truth, fiction, narrator, and author.

### **Within and Beyond the Veil**

Through her writing, Djébar presents many different realities of the veil. Victoria Best explains that

Djébar is writing of a community traumatized by the Algerian War of Independence and seeking to reconstitute itself in an authentic postcolonial way. A fundamental problem for this society is the role that women should be allowed to play and whether they should continue to be confined, primarily within the house and secondarily within the veil. This act of confinement, of mapping out the space within which women may exist, is all about investing arbitrary borderlines with excessive cultural significance, both in terms of national and gender identity (873).

In Djébar's novel, after Hajila begins to venture out in public she asks herself, "Les femmes qui sortent dévoilées possèdent-elles vraiment plusieurs robes? A chaque sortie, elles se préparent longuement, elles prennent le temps de choisir, une couleur, une soie, un corsage drapé! Tu rêves à cette richesse, à cette chance que goûtent tant d'inconnues" (*Ombre* 51). This passage shows the anonymity of the veil in contrast to the individuality that is implied through wearing distinct fashions. When Hajila is outdoors she removes her haik and refers to this act as "naked in the world outdoors." She then describes herself as "nue, je suis Hajila toute nue" (*Ombre* 41). When she returns home after her walk she is a new woman, as the narrator Isma explains, "Hajila nouvelle qui froidement te dévisage" (*Ombre* 43). Once Hajila begins to venture outdoors Isma states, "Tu marchais à l'ombre; tu vas au soleil" (*Ombre* 38). At this point in time, a role reversal has taken place between Isma and Hajila. Isma is now in the shadows while Hajila adopts the dominant role.

### **The Hammam**

*Ombre sultane* ends with a scene at the *hammam* or the Turkish baths during which Isma offers a key to Hajila. Similarly the third novel in the autobiographical quartet, *Vaste est la prison*, opens with the narrator visiting the public baths with her mother-in-law. This description of the private, all-female space of the Turkish baths within each of the narratives links the two novels together. In her married life, “Isma,” the narrator of *Vaste est la prison*, describes her home environment as a prison and a space of fear and violence due to a loveless marriage that is characterized by physical and emotional abuse. After one of her husband’s violent episodes, Isma is driven out of the domestic space that they share together: “Le visage tuméfié, les mains dans les pansements, le corps rompu tandis que je reposais chez mes parents” (*Prison* 85). This portrayal is quite similar to the violent relationship experienced by Hajila when she is beaten by her husband: “Quand son bras lève la bouteille brisée, invoquant le Prophète, tu te protèges les yeux; il te blesse au bras, le sang jaillit de l’entaille et l’homme demeure bras tendu, à fixer le sang” (*Ombre* 96). Isma serves as the narrator for both episodes of violence, relating and comparing her own experience with domestic violence in *Vaste est la prison* to the abuse suffered by Hajila in *Ombre sultane*. While in the domestic space, Isma and Hajila are vulnerable to the patriarchal gaze and the violence of their husbands. This private space of the home that is shared with abusive husbands is juxtaposed to the communal, all-female space of the *hammam* enjoyed each week by both women.

In sharp contrast to the domestic space that Hajila and Isma share with their spouses, the tranquil ambiance of the *hammam*, is described by Isma in *Ombre sultane* as:

Un répit ou un jardin immuable. Le bruit d'eau supprime les murs, les corps se libèrent sous les marbres mouillés. Chaque nuit, le bain maure, qui sert de dortoir aux ruraux de passage, devient un harem inversé, perméable—comme si, dans la dissolution des sueurs, des odeurs, des peaux mores, cette prison liquide devenait lieu de renaissance nocturne. De transfusion. Là s'effectuent les passages de symbole, là jaillissent les éclairs de connivence; et leurs frôlements tremblés (*Ombre* 158).

This citation gives the (Western) reader a privileged glimpse into this all-female space that has been enjoyed by Maghrebi women. In the peace, calm, and tranquility of this feminine space, the women are able to unveil their bodies and their intimate thoughts as they converse with their friends, neighbors, and family members. Since the interior of the *hammam* is a space where men cannot enter, the women are free from the male gaze, and their status as sexual objects is temporarily suspended. Sheltered from the outside world, the *hammam* is a private space for cleansing, relaxation, and free speech, as well as female companionship and collusion. In the third autobiographical volume, *Vaste est la prison*, Isma portrays once again the interior of the *hammam*:

L'antichambre, tapissée de matelas, de nattes où l'on vous servait à la satiété oranges épluchées, grenades ouvertes et du sirop d'orgeat, devenait des havres des délices. Les parfums se mêlaient au-dessus des corps des dormeuses, ou autour de celles qui, frémissantes, s'habillaient lentement tout en dévidant de menus commérages (*Prison* 12).

Thus, the hammam is portrayed in Djébar's autobiography as a space of safety and relaxation where women can converse freely with one another.

When speaking of the Turkish baths Fatima Mernissi explains that “if chaperoned, women are allowed to trespass into the men’s universe on the traditional visits to the *hammam*, the public bath” (143). At the end of *Ombre sultane*, Isma and Hajila meet and speak to one another in the space of the Turkish baths. After washing together, Isma

offers Hajila her former key to the apartment, saying, “Touma t’empêche de sortir, sauf pour ce bain hebdomadaire. Que tu gardes cet enfant dans ton ventre ou que tu le rejettes, c’est à toi d’en décider! Sors, consulte un médecin, une amie, qui tu veux. Sors seulement pour sortir!” (*Ombre* 163). In offering Hajila the key, Isma also offers the cloistered Hajila physical and social freedom, for she now has the opportunity to leave the apartment at will and thus to escape her cruel husband. This complicity between the two wives mirrors the team work of Dinarzade and Scheherazade, who worked together to conspire against the sultan. This gesture suggests that women gain freedom and emancipation ultimately by working with and helping each other.

### **The Harem**

In her description of the interior of the *hammam*, Isma refers to the Turkish baths as a *harem in reverse* that is accessible to all (women). Like the Turkish baths, the forbidden space of the oriental harem has fascinated Westerners and has been the topic of European and American travel narratives, paintings, and films for centuries. However, the West’s portrayal of this private space within various art forms is mostly fiction and fantasy. When speaking of *Harum Scarum*, the 1965 Hollywood film starring Elvis Presley, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that the representation of the harem is “an alluring and tantalizing forbidden world, seen as infinitely desirable to the instinctual primitive presumably inhabiting all men” (161). Shohat and Stam further explain that “the Arabic etymology of the word 'harem' (*harim*) refers to something 'forbidden' and 'sacred'” (162). When speaking of the harem, Leila Ahmed characterizes it as “a space

for women forbidden to the male”); the fact that harem means forbidden or holy also suggests that,

it was women who were doing the forbidding, excluding men from their society, and that it was therefore women who developed the model of strict segregation in the first place. Here women share living time and living space, exchange experience and information, and critically analyze—often through jokes, stories, or plays—the world of men (529).

Djebar’s portrayal of harem life supports Ahmed’s claims. Djebar’s harems are quite different than those of Western men and women, most of which have never been inside the walls of a harem. Paradoxically, she talks about being liberated from the harem by her father: in *Ombre sultane* the autobiographical narrator Isma states: “Je me disais à tout instant que mon père m’avait libérée du harem” (*Ombre* 134). Although Djebar did not live within a harem, she did have access to and contact with contemporary harems during her childhood and adolescence. In addition to the harem of the Sheik, she spent brief parts of her childhood within her family’s harem. In the chapter of *Ombre sultane* entitled “Patios,” Isma discusses her memory of the family harem:

Je me souviens d’une maison mauresque, la plus ancienne, mais la plus vaste de mon quartier natal. Arcades de marbre torsadé, galeries de céramiques où les jaune cuivre, les bleus passés et les verts délavés gardaient leur harmonie malgré l’usure: deux étages s’élevaient autour de la cour dont la vasque me fascinait quand je venais chaque après-midi d’été rendre visite à une tante. Trois branches familiales logeaient à chacun des niveaux; l’ancêtre, un notable d’autrefois, avait eu trois épouses successives, la dernière étant ma grand-mère entrée là à peine nubile (*Ombre* 85).

Unlike the *hammam* which is portrayed as a space that is soothing, tranquil, and calming, the harem is described by Isma as a place of conflict, social hierarchies, and imprisonment: “A l’intérieur des chambres, des phrases amères se dévidaient—

confidence révoltée d'une mère, monologue d'une épouse rageuse après la sortie du maître, sanglots hululés de telle autre rivée à un matelas de douleur, soupirs d'une épouse stérile dont le mari a pris seconde femme" (*Ombre* 87).

In the chapter entitled "Patios" in *Ombre sultane*, Isma describes a specific moment of conflict within the family harem. The terrace or the patio of a harem is an important and coveted space for cloistered women because they can see the sky. When an uncle proposed to enclose the patio with a glass ceiling to show off the family's wealth, the women of the harem protested: "Pas de verrière, pas de verrière, un coin de ciel seulement!" (*Ombre* 88). This episode demonstrates the importance of gendered space and personal freedom within the harem. The women of the harem refused to be enclosed by the uncle's glass ceiling. This moment also supports Ahmed's definition of the harem since it is clear that in this instance the men were *forbidden* by the women to install a glass ceiling over the patio. Thus, despite their confinements to the inside of the family home, the women do exercise a significant amount of power within the domestic space.

### **The French Night**

During the French colonial occupation of Algeria, space was divided by gender as well as by the colonizer / colonized paradigm. When speaking of the French of France and their relationship to the private space of the homes of native Algerians, the narrator explains that when she was a child the French colonizers "n'entraient que rarement chez nous; nous ne franchissions pas leur seuils; nous nous contentions de saluts courtois dans

l'escalier ou dans la cour" (*Prison* 258). Although colonial Algeria was occupied and inhabited by the French, the private space of the family home was typically off limits to the colonial Other. When Djébar was a child, her family lived in the housing provided for the teachers of the French colonial school system. While the French did not commonly enter her parent's home, she explains that her family was the only native Algerian family on the block. Even though they were surrounded by French colonists, they did not enter the homes of the colonizers. However, in the chapter of *Vaste est la prison* entitled "De la narratrice dans la nuit française," Djébar describes a rare moment during World War II when domestic spatial frontiers were crossed by the French Other.

When a country is occupied, the native occupants are forced to share social space with the invaders. During the Second World War, Algeria experienced a double occupation when the Germans assumed control of the French colony. In "De la narratrice dans la nuit française," the four-year-old narrator awakens in her bed to find a French woman and her son Maurice sleeping in her parents' bed. She later learned that the air raids had caused the woman to panic and she had come to their home to find security. Not only had she entered their home, but she and her son slept in the parental bed, an example of how the arrival of the Germans had forced a temporary restructuring of the spatial boundaries in place in French colonial Algeria.

### **The Tree With No Words**

In the same chapter, the narrator recalls another episode with the French boy Maurice, who is twelve, while she has not yet reached her fifth birthday. The two

children are climbing lemon trees: Maurice climbs to the highest branch while the narrator, despite encouragement from her playmate, remains frozen and immobile on the bottom branch: “Bizarrement, je refuse; je reste à ma place. Je crains le contact. Comme si parvenir à la même branche, m’accroupir à ses côtés, me paraissait confusément le péché suprême” (*Prison* 265). At this moment in her life, the narrator had not yet learned French. Metaphorically, the tree represents (the French) language and the more that one knows, the higher he or she can climb socially and linguistically: “Le plus incompréhensible dans ma mémoire est que je revois cette scène de l’arbre, dépouillée de mots et de toute parole de ma part. Accompagnée d’aucun bruit: nul rire, nulle exclamation, pas la moindre répartie. . . Ainsi je ne parlais pas encore français” (*Prison* 265). As a result of his knowledge of the colonizer’s language, Maurice has no limits and can climb to the top of the tree while the narrator cannot climb any higher until she learns French. The episode shows the sociolinguistic limits and the silence experienced by those who do not speak the language of the colonizers, suggesting that without language, one cannot climb the social ladder of society.

### **The Colonial School**

As we have already seen in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn, and Maryse Condé, the theme of the French school is one of the most commonly represented subjects of women’s autobiographical expression of the twentieth century. The French colonial school system played an important role in Djébar’s life from an early age and she wrote about her *scolarité* in both *L’amour, la fantasia* and in *Vaste est la*

*prison*. *L'amour, la fantasia* opens with a description of Djébar's father taking her to school for the first time. This life-altering day is also described in *Vaste est la prison*, thus directly linking the narratives of the first and third volumes of the Algerian quartet and sustaining the theme of education:

Ecole de filles et école de garçons n'étaient séparées que par un grillage, au milieu de la grande cour centrale. De l'immeuble où nous habitons jusqu'à cette école communale, il n'y avait qu'une centaine de mètres; je les ai parcourus, du moins les deux premières années, main dans la main du père, lui le seul maître arabe en langue française (*Prison* 266).

In both descriptions, the father's role in overseeing her education is emphasized. In addition, just like the private homes, schools were also a space that was divided along cultural lines, and segregated by gender for girls and boys had separate classes. "Native" children did not normally attend class with the children of French colonists. However, since her father was a teacher, the young Djébar was able to cross the barriers created by gender within the space of the French school. Ironically, the French colonial school system provided the narrator with educational opportunities that she would otherwise not have been able to experience.

As a result of the education that she received in the French colonial school where her father taught, Djébar became the intellectual and writer that she is today. The narrator of *Ombre sultane*, Isma, states that her father's gesture delivered her from the life in the harem (134). In taking her to school that day so that she could learn to read and write in French, her father changed the trajectory of his daughter's life forever. Once she attended school and learned the French language, the tree that she climbed with Maurice developed words. According to Laurie Corbin, "French schooling has freed her

from many of the restrictions that most Algerian women experience, yet this freedom is paid for by the loss of self that results from a sense of isolation within her community”

(43). In *Ombre sultane*, Isma describes her situation after finishing primary school:

Je poursuivis mes études dans la capitale. Pour cela j’entrai en pension: quelques rares jeunes filles, comme moi préservées de la claustration tout en continuant à la longer rêveusement, à cause de cette proximité ou de cette menace, s’y sentaient doublement étrangères à leurs condisciples européennes, filles des colons de la plaine (140).

### **Cultural Swing**

Although Djébar was an “emancipated”<sup>53</sup> Arab girl as a result of her father’s involvement in her education, there are moments when the intersection of gender, space, and personal freedom creates a socio-cultural paradox during which the narrator finds herself ‘swinging’ between two worlds. The chapter entitled “La balançoire” in *Ombre sultane* details one such moment in Djébar’s life, when she swings between childhood and adolescence, and emancipation and tradition. In that chapter, Djébar describes the physical and mental freedom and exhilaration that she experienced when riding a large, metal swing at a fair with one of her male cousins. Unlike the episode with the tree stripped of words, the narrator in *Ombre sultane* is no longer afraid to climb on the swing and to rise high above the earth: “Je sentis mon corps s’élever et se rythmer en tanguant régulièrement, plus rien n’exista, ni la ville, ni la foule, ni le cousin, seul l’espace mobile et mon propre balancement” (146).

As a result of her ride on the swing, she found her own private space and personal freedom when she was lifted high above the ground, an experience similar to the short-

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<sup>53</sup> She refers to herself this way in *Ombre sultane* on page 137.

lived freedom that Elisabeth Lacoïn enjoyed during her time in Berlin. However, when the narrator's father saw her, he became enraged because his daughter had worn a short skirt and all the men down below could gaze at her dangling legs. The father's anger is similar to the anger felt by Condé's mother when she learned that her daughter had been captivated by the beauty of Amélie in church. Both episodes are centered around the theme of *le regard*. In the case of Djébar, the father feared that the male gaze of strangers would cast its shadow over his daughter's adolescent body. At that moment, he recognized her sexuality and thus identified her as a woman rather than as a child. In contrast to the young Djébar, Maryse was not scolded for being seen but rather for gazing upon the white, colonial other whose beauty was "off limits" according to her mother. In the days following her ride on the swing, Djébar's young narrator was not allowed to eat with her father during meals, banished from the paternal space as a result of the father's gaze; the seemingly innocent ride on the swing transformed the narrator from a child to an adolescent in a matter of moments; when she climbed on the swing she was a little girl; when she dismounted she was a woman: "Ce jour-là, je m'exilai de l'enfance; les mots paternels m'avaient projetée ailleurs, plus haut que la balançoire des forains, ou au plus profond d'un gouffre étrange" (148).

### **Algerian Society and The Gaze**

The gendered gaze and the themes of watching, seeing, and being seen that are central to contemporary Algerian society are also key components of Assia Djébar's novels. Her writing is characterized by the rich visual imagery that is embedded within

her written narratives. It is presented to the reader first through painting and tableaux, then through photography, and eventually through film, thus following the historical trajectory of the emergence of these art forms. Hédi Abdel-Jaouad explains that “Djebar opens and closes here narrative with a direct reference to two nineteenth century painters: Eugène Delacroix and Eugène Fromentin” (25). Both Fromentin and Delacroix traveled to Algeria during the time of the French invasion in order to portray, through oil and canvas, Oriental landscapes of the colonization of Algeria. Djebar’s writing in *L’amour, la fantasia* also provides vivid landscapes and scenes of Algeria’s suffering. By referencing Fromentin in the opening, her text functions as a response to Fromentin’s tableaux. When speaking of Djebar’s vivid, picturesque accounts of the French colonization of Algeria, Mary Jean Green states that her accounts “paint a colorful picture, not unlike those of Delacroix and Fromentin, to whom Djebar refers in her text” (962). One example of Djebar’s appropriation of tableau-like imagery appears at the beginning of the chapter “Biffure,” in which the narrator mentions

La prise de l’Imprenable. . . Images érodées, délitées de la roche du Temps. Des lettres de mots français se profilent, allongées ou élargies dans leur étrangeté, contre les parois des cavernes, dans l’aura des flammes d’incendies successifs, tatouant les visages disparus de diaprures rougeoyantes (*Fantasia* 69).

Djebar’s language, style, and description of conquest appeal to, and call upon, the reader’s sense of vision. As David Waterman notes, “In *Fantasia*, Djebar anthropomorphizes Algeria with violent, erotic clichés too, but she goes beyond simile, creating a novel which centers on Algeria under occupation as inextricably linked to the female body, functioning as the site of signification and meditation” (319). As he also

observes, “There are in *Fantasia* many examples of women’s bodies seen as part of the landscape, to be looted with impunity by the conqueror. The women, like the land itself, are in the hands of the French soldiers” (324). Yet while *L’amour, la fantasia* privileges painting through her inclusion of rich visual imagery, photography and film are at the core of visual representations within *Vaste est la prison*, the third novel of the quartet.

In *Vaste est la prison*, the narrator makes reference to the social significance of her *scolarité* as she recalls and describes a school photograph that was taken of her father’s all-male class in 1940. In addition to being the only girl, she is also the youngest pupil. At this moment, her father seems to ignore her gender. Not only does he include her, but he places her in the middle of the photograph:

Il a oublié une seconde que j’étais une fille, donc pour ses élèves garçons quelqu’un à part. . . Il est venu me chercher, il m’a prise par la main; il a fait reculer les garçons du premier rang et il m’a fait asseoir au centre, face au photographe. . . Il a repris, sur le côté, sa place de maître vigilant. Et moi, alors, comme trônant, reine inattendue parmi ces futurs guerriers! (*Prison* 270).

The fact that the only female and youngest student in this all-male school is situated in the middle of the photograph is significant because she is allowed to occupy the privileged center of the group rather than the margins. In this way, the photo reveals a moment of (temporary) female agency since the image seems to validate the young girl's own subjectivity. The photograph captures and records this moment in time when the only Algerian female subject passes from the periphery of society to the privileged center. Later, when Djébar turned to filmmaking, she became the female artist taking the photo, rather than the feminine subject being photographed by another. Her discussion of

this school photo in the novel is reminiscent of the family photo described by Simone de Beauvoir in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*. In both instances, the writers have incorporated a discussion of childhood photos into their autobiographical narratives, and both photos portray a favorable or picture-perfect moment in time.

### **The Filming of *La nouba* in *Vaste est la prison***

In addition to painting and photography, film and filmmaking play a central role in the writing and the artistic expression of Djébar. When overcome by silence and unable to write for twelve years, Djébar turned her attention to film as an alternative artistic medium, and during these years of literary silence, she directed two films: *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1978) and *La zerda et les chants de l'oubli* (1982). *La nouba*, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, won the International Critics Prize at the 1979 film festival in Venice. Through film, Djébar was able to circumvent many of the sociolinguistic obstacles that she encountered in her writing because the sounds and visual images of the motion picture screen could reach a wider Algerian audience, and one with varying degrees of literacy. While Djébar's novels were in French, her films are also in Berber and Arabic, bringing her work closer to the women of her native Algeria. Finally, the use of subtitles combined with the visual imagery made the personal narratives of the women of Mount Chenoua accessible to a world-wide audience

Several chapters of *Vaste est la prison* are dedicated to a discussion of the filming of *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, which turns the literary space of *Vaste est la*

*prison* into an important artistic crossroads where film, literature, and (auto)biography are intertwined. The lens of the camera also provides Djébar with a technological eye through which she can gaze at and film others and the world around her. When speaking of the socio-cultural significance of the gaze and gender, Victoria Best stresses the reason why the lens of the camera and the gaze are so important for Djébar and her work:

The eye and the gaze formed potent symbols within Djébar's culture. It is precisely to deny women their gaze—because of its sexual power—that they were kept confined. Djébar marks her distance from her own culture with this academic appreciation of the visual arts, and in an act of virtual transgression she analyzes the perception of the male gaze (875).

When the female artist holds the camera, the writing self or the “I” of the written texts is seen through the “eye” of the camera lens, and the male gaze is reversed. When she began filming *La nouba* and *La zerda*, thus temporarily exchanging her pen for a camera, Djébar was transformed from a passive female object to an active, filming subject-artist.

The lens of the camera simultaneously functions as an artistic tool and a seeing eye that objectifies the male subject, thus dismantling the traditional paradigm of the seeing and watching male patriarch. In her writing, Djébar frequently makes reference to the desire to escape the masculine gaze. As an Algerian woman she is not only the object of the male gaze, but she is also under the constant scrutiny of the colonial Other. As Ania Loomba explains, “In patriarchal society, women are split subjects who watch themselves being watched by men. They turn themselves into objects because femininity itself is defined by being gazed upon by men” (162). Through her writing and filmmaking Djébar reverses the traditional male gaze. By employing the pen and the lens of the camera to her advantage, she revolts against colonial as well as gendered power

structures. In the chapter of *Vaste est la prison* entitled “Femme Arable I,” a man in a wheel chair is filmed inside his home. Power is thus shifted by the filmmaker from the traditional family patriarch to his wife, Lila, who is now occupying the position of the head of the household. Emphasis is also placed on unveiling and documenting the suffering of women and children of Mount Chenoua. While men are present, they are not the central subjects of the film. When speaking of filmmaking in *Vaste est la prison*, Djébar’s narrator explains, “Seule ici, j’ai rendez-vous avec l’espace. Celui de mon enfance, et de quoi d’autre. . . peut-être de cette fiction à créer” (219).

Assia Djébar’s work as a writer, filmmaker, and historian empowers her to piece together the fractured self by re-inscribing women within Algeria’s national history. In addition, she writes herself into her country’s literary history while simultaneously rekindling lost female voices from the fabric of the nation’s painful historical past. As she states at the end of *L’amour, la fantasia*, “Et les aurores se rallument parce que j’écris” (303). Yet, as the analysis of *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* will show in the next chapter, her “rendez-vous” with space and fame has not only been through pen and paper. Together with other female filmmakers of the French-speaking world such as Yamina Benguigui, Assia Djébar is also literally *shooting* a new canon of postcolonial artistic expression.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**SHOOTING THE CANON: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES FROM**  
**PAGE TO SCREEN**

"L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas."

Marguerite Duras, *l'amant* (1984)

**Women Filming The French-Speaking World**

The previous chapters have examined written colonial and postcolonial autobiographical narratives by Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn, Maryse Condé, and Assia Djebar in order to illuminate stylistic, thematic, and theoretical issues associated with life-writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Throughout this analysis, which has examined writings from France, Guadeloupe, and Algeria, several different autobiographical genres such as memoirs, journal entries, letters, short stories, autobiographical fiction, and a fictitious autobiography have been analyzed to compare and contrast the life-writing of French-speaking women of the colonial and postcolonial eras. Yet in addition to the emergence of an unprecedented number of female-authored autobiographical texts throughout the entire Francophone world, the twentieth century witnessed the invention and the development of the art of film. Alongside written texts, filmmaking has become another important site of autobiographical expression as many French-speaking women have employed the camera lens and the motion picture screen to portray the self and other(s). In her book *From Split To Screened Selves*, Rachel Gabara notes that "an ever increasing presence of all sorts of cameras means that more and more of us have still and moving images with which to illustrate the narratives of our lives" (4). She further adds that "we must examine how our conception of autobiographical

narrative has been changed by such images” (45). In *A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Christian Metz explains that one of the most important questions explored by film theory is “the impression of reality experienced by the spectator” (4). According to Metz, “Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator” (4) whereas written texts do not produce this same impression within the reader. Through the combination of sound and image, cinematography can give the spectator the impression that he / she is actively sharing and experiencing the stories of those portrayed within the films. Just as women autobiographers have been *writing* and developing new literary canons, this chapter will show how Assia Djébar and Yamina Benguigui are *shooting* a new artistic canon through their appropriation of the camera lens.

### **Shooting *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua***

In their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* Ella Shohat and Robert Stam state that “while the Third World is inundated with North American films, TV series, popular music, and news programs, the First World receives precious little of the vast cultural production of the Third World, and what it does receive is usually mediated by transnational corporations” (31). Even though *La nouba* falls under the generic category of Third World cinema, the production of this film made Assia Djébar known world-wide as the first female filmmaker of Algeria. Jeanne-Marie Clerc describes the film's significance for Djébar and for the nation of Algeria: “La réalisation, pour la télévision algérienne, d’un film sur Mont Chenoua et la région de Cherchell qui l’avait vue naître est pour elle l’occasion d’une triple rencontre: avec les

femmes de son pays, avec leur langue, avec l'Histoire" (2000, 422). *La nouba* was conceived by Djébar in the years following the publication of her first four novels which include *La Soif* (1957), *Les Impatients* (1958), *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962), and *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967). In addition, *La nouba* was made in 1977, after Assia Djébar's ten-year period of literary silence. It is dedicated and functions as a eulogy to a resistance fighter named Yasmina Oudaï who was captured, tortured, and killed by French soldiers. Oudaï is referred to in the film by the pseudonym "Zoulikha." The eulogistic tones of *La nouba* are reminiscent of the way Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* eulogizes the life of Elisabeth Lacoin.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Djébar was criticized by many Algerians for writing and publishing in the language of the colonizers during a time when Algeria was fighting to establish a new postcolonial identity independent from that which developed during 132 years of French occupation. Thus, although her knowledge of French came with many benefits, Djébar began to feel ostracized and isolated from the women of her country who spoke only the Berber and Arabic dialects of the region. When speaking of Djébar's linguistic dilemma, Zahia Salhi explains,

She realized that writing in French had alienated her from the country's Arab women, the majority of whom are illiterate. In fact, even writing in classical Arabic would not have been much different, as these women only understand the colloquial Arabic spoken in Algeria. In order to come to terms with this dilemma, and reconcile it with her own search for identity, Djébar decided to turn to film (22).

In 1977, the filming of *La nouba* served as an artistic bridge between Assia Djébar and the Arabo-ophone women of the newly independent nation of Algeria, for unlike her novels, which are written in French, *La nouba* is entirely in the Arabic and Berber

dialects of her region of Western Algeria.<sup>54</sup> A *nouba* is a traditional song from Andalusia composed of five movements and it is also a collective story that several individuals take turns telling (Gabara 98). The film's title emphasizes the importance of women, community, music, and oral tradition within Algerian society as well as within Djébar's novels. The three autobiographical novels discussed in Chapter 3 were written *after* the making of the film and continue to include musical and historical elements as well as many of the same stories and characters featured in the film. Thus, within this artistic space, Djébar unites music, film history, memory, Algerian women, and oral tradition. As a result of the incorporation of these elements, Valérie Budig-Markin refers to *La nouba* as "docufiction" (893). While filmmaking and the rhetoric of visual imagery are privileged within Djébar's novels themselves, many of the historical themes from her novels are now found in her film. As a result, her novels and films are intertwined, and for Djébar, writing and filmmaking become closely connected forms of artistic expression.

### ***Vaste est la prison* As Film Journal**

The literary space of Djébar's novels is known for the incorporation of many art forms including photography, music, film, painting, postcards, and the epistolary. As we saw earlier, the novel *Vaste est la prison* is a literary text that devotes space to the discussion of the art of film. In the third part of this autobiographical novel, entitled "Un silencieux désir," Djébar's female narrator known to the reader only as "Isma" presents in

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<sup>54</sup> The film is available in subtitled versions in French and English.

a first-person narrative the details of the filming of *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*. The film is also discussed in seven different chapters entitled “Femme arable” followed by the Roman numerals I-VII. The aggregate of these seven chapters forms a film or work journal within the larger work. In “Femme Arable II”, Isma describes the mountain of Chenoua in cinematographic terms: “Ecran presque de théâtre devant les montagnes de ma famille où, depuis déjà quatre mois, je circule” (*Prison* 199). Thus, for Assia Djebar, Chenoua was an ideal location for shooting film.

After the war, Djebar, through interaction with women from Chenoua, discovered that silence characterized the lives of the women and children of Algeria who, like her, had survived the horrific violence of the war of Algerian independence<sup>55</sup>. Algerian women did not have an effective way of publicly voicing and sharing what they had experienced. The plot of *La nouba* is centered around the journey of the protagonist Lila, a middle-aged Algerian architect who fought in and was imprisoned during the war. The film is driven more by images and silence than by dialogue and discourse. The vast spaces of linguistic silence emphasize the fact that many of the personal stories and experiences of war are unspeakable. In this way, the silence within the film, along side of the images of Chenoua, agitate and disturb the spectator.

Lila returns to her birthplace in the mountainous region of Chenoua in the postwar period in order to reconnect with her heritage and to interview other women from her tribe about their experiences during the war. Her postcolonial quest for the historic past represents a cinematographic crossroads where modernity and tradition collide. Through

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<sup>55</sup> The war took place between 1954-1962.

language, style, and subject matter, Djébar erases most of Western culture from her film in order to privilege the rich cultural heritage of Algeria and the Maghreb. Artistically, the film's structure, characters, and content are in opposition to the West's traditional, Hollywood-style films, and were inspired in part by the cinematographic style of Marguerite Duras<sup>56</sup>. Within their films, Duras and Djébar are known for their use of montage, silence, the incorporation of war footage<sup>57</sup>, and the absence of a linear plot. The violence and horrors that were the result of the French colonial empire are common themes explored by Duras, Djébar, and other female filmmakers from the (former) French colonies. *La nouba* begins with writing in Arabic scrolling up the screen accompanied by a woman's voice speaking in Arabic. Unlike the rest of the film, this segment does not contain subtitles in European languages for non-arabophones. As a result, Western spectators are linguistically excluded from this segment. Music is also at the heart of the film and present throughout its duration. The sound track is a mixture of songs from classical European and popular Algerian music in the Berber and Arabic dialects of Chenoua. At times the music is purely instrumental while at other instances it is a combination of instruments and singing. A group of musicians is also filmed playing traditional musical instruments from the region. As a result, musical instruments and their musicians are not only heard but also seen and visually captured by the camera.

Like the filmmaker Assia Djébar, Lila travels across the countryside to record the experiences of the women who witnessed and survived the Algerian war. Her day-to-day activities are accompanied by an unknown female narrator in the form of a voice-over.

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<sup>56</sup> In particular, *La nouba* is stylistically similar to Duras' *India Song* and *Hiroshima mon amour*.

<sup>57</sup> Sometimes the footage is real, other times it is a fictional reproduction.

The spectator must decide if the voice belongs to Lila or to another anonymous, omniscient female narrator. Due to the presence of this female narrator, who in many ways is the cinematic equivalent of “Isma” in the novels, Lila’s speech is rarely heard during the interviews; emphasis is thus placed on the voices and stories of the women interviewed. Through Lila’s daily travels across the region of Chenoua, the film links oral tradition, the art of cinematography, and women’s history as the memories and personal stories of each woman are unveiled. As Réda Bensmaïa explains, “What Lila seeks through these women is not merely some (unattainable) comfort, but the origin and meaning of her own life” (882). Three different historical time periods are represented in a non-chronological order throughout the film. By breaking away from a linear plot structure, Djébar is shooting a new canon of Francophone film. The interviews conducted by Lila take place during the postcolonial era, contemporary to the making of the film<sup>58</sup>. Lila’s personal story is in color and intertwined with black and white footage from 1954 to 1962, during the war of independence. In this way, the spectators are led to believe that the footage is authentic. Scenes from Lila’s childhood during which her grandmother tells her stories of their tribe are present in the form of flashbacks. Finally, scenes of occupation and colonial conquest appear in the second half of the film in order to remind the spectator of the events that took place in 1871, when nearly the entire Ouled Riah tribe was exterminated in the cave of Dahra by French soldiers. The horrific events surrounding the massacre of the Ouled Riah tribe were written about a few years after the shooting of the film in *L’amour, la fantasia*. Djébar's willingness and desire to

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<sup>58</sup> Assia Djébar herself began interviewing women in Algeria in 1975.

incorporate the account of the massacre of the Ouled Riah tribe within her novels and films is a means of revisiting the buried and forgotten past. The narrator of *La nouba* echoes this desire when she states, “The enemy buried you alive,” “history is revisited,” and “The shadow of a living truth submerged in the past.” In making these statements, she addresses the viewing spectators as well as the lost members of the tribe.

*La nouba* begins with Lila turning her back to the eye / lens of the camera while stating, “I speak, I speak, I speak,” followed by “I don’t want anyone to see me. I don’t want you to see me.” The ambiguous ‘you’ refers not only to her husband Ali but also to the (male) spectators of the film. Although she is at the center of the film, Lila paradoxically does not want to be looked at. This desire to escape the gaze can be explained in cultural terms. According to Anne Donadey, “Djebar’s entire work can be understood as an answer to the ‘regard interdit, son coupé’ (forbidden gaze, severed sound) that she perceives as the major problem of Algerian society” (891). Lila’s silence and her need to escape the male gaze echoes and emphasizes the importance of these themes in contemporary Algeria. When the narrator states within the first four minutes of the film, “I’ve lost everyone. Mother, father, uncle, brother disappeared. I’ll return to my homeland,” Lila and the anonymous narrator have introduced several key djebarian themes such as the forbidden male gaze, feminine space, multiple prisons, death, and collective memory. The fact that Lila is female and an architect symbolizes not only her agency and autonomy in the professional world, but also Algeria’s need to rebuild a strong nation in the aftermath of the war that killed an estimated 1,300,000 Algerians. Both men and women must work together to restore and reconstruct a new nation.

Since Lila's moments of speech in the film are rare, the spectators come to know her through the music and images of her everyday life as well as through her journalistic pursuit of the each woman's story. As the *cine-biographer*, Lila is the intermediary between the spectators and the women interviewed. Like an architect, she rebuilds the stories of the war by conducting numerous interviews. Her patience and her willingness to listen bring the once-silenced stories to the surface. When the camera focuses on Lila, the anonymous female narrator speaks, revealing Lila's thoughts, articulating the goal of the protagonist's quest when she says that she is "listening to the sound of broken memory." As Lila listens to these broken memories, she and the narrator encourage the spectators to become actively engaged in the film. This is most evident when the spectators are directly addressed by the narrator: "Oh you the spectators of this Nouba." Since a "nouba" is a song, it should logically be heard not viewed, but this statement reveals Djébar's artistic trademark known as "*image-son*" a technique that Jeanne-Marie Clerc describes as "Une nouvelle forme d'écriture que découvre Assia Djébar" (2000, 422). This artistic process brings together sound, noise, music, and images of quotidian life. As Mireille Calle-Gruber also explains,

L'image-son constitue ainsi un processus critique du dispositif cinématographique: elle convoque les effets d'illusion mais pas sans la situation scénique; elle utilise le registre lyrique mais pas sans le calcul architectural des voix; elle offre le récit ou le tableau en témoignage, mais pas sans la traversée spectrale des apparences. C'est-à-dire la palette du réel lorsqu'il passe au prisme de la littérature ou du cinéma (64).

### **Lila: Djébar's Cinematic Avatar**

Although Lila is a fictional character played by an actress for the purpose of the film, she shares many biographical similarities with the filmmaker herself. Like Djébar,

she has benefited at least in part from a Western education, she is unveiled, and appears more emancipated than other women featured in the films since like Djébar, she has been influenced by the West. She wears European clothes, goes out in public, and drives a jeep. The physical resemblance between the actress who plays Lila and Assia Djébar is also remarkable and not a mere coincidence. Lila is the same age as Djébar was when she made the film in 1977. The character and the filmmaker were both born in the mountainous regions of Chenoua, they both fought in the war of independence, and lost a brother to the war's violence. Thus, an autobiographical dimension is suggested within the film, as Lila functions as a cinematographic avatar of Djébar. Through Lila's voice, and the narrator's voice-over, Djébar is able to piece together Algeria's broken past by rekindling individual and collective memory. As Mildred Mortimer states, "Joining in the Berber women's oral tradition of music and dance, Lila accomplishes the task that Djébar as writer and filmmaker set as her goal; she restores severed sound to her maternal past" (861).

In many ways, Lila and the female narrator are also cinematographic versions of "Isma" in *Vaste est la prison* and *Ombre sultane*. Although Lila and Isma are fictional characters and distinctly separate from Assia Djébar, they do share many common traits with their creator, and as a result, they function as intermediaries between the author and the reader / spectator. Thus, Djébar is able to express and project many of her own personal experiences through the shooting of this film, and in doing so, she reinforces its autobiographical dimension. When speaking of the relationship between film, reality, and fiction, Djébar explains that "la caméra se met en question pour faire sentir cela: le

procès constant de la réalité contre la fiction, de la réalité de plus en plus présente contre la fiction” (*Prison* 302). In the film journal segments of *Vaste est la prison*, Isma also remarks that the mirror seen in her bedroom<sup>59</sup> is from her mother’s house and that it originally to belong to her maternal grandmother. In this way, the mirror becomes a metaphor of the reflection of the self within the film. In addition, we are told that Aicha’s bed is from Isma’s childhood home. By including objects from her own childhood in this film, Djébar has embedded the film with pieces of herself and from the past of her maternal relatives.

### **"Fate Made You a Prisoner"**

Although Lila and Algeria are free, both the individual and the nation are still held captive by numerous prisons, so the main female character becomes symbolic of the nation. The multiple prisons evoked within the film include Lila’s home, her memories of the war, the male gaze, the prison where she was held during the war, and the cave of Dahra. Silence characterizes Lila and Ali’s loveless union. Like many of Djébar’s female protagonists, Lila is on the brink of leaving her unhappy marriage; the couple is no longer physically or emotionally intimate, and all lines of communication have been suspended. In a symbolic way, the silence and sterility of their passionless marriage mirror the stagnation of the postcolonial era, during which the formerly colonized nations of Africa struggle to rebuild and redefine their societies. As Lila questions whether or not she should tell Ali about the time she spent in prison during the war, the narrator’s

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<sup>59</sup> Lila and her daughter are seen in the film playing in front of the mirror.

voice-over says, “Prisoner, fate made you a prisoner.” According to Touria Khannous, “One of the central themes in contemporary Maghrebi cinema is the condition of Arab women,” and yet despite this, “All-female spaces are often neglected in North African films” (47). One of Djébar’s notable achievements is that *La nouba* challenges this trend of neglect since the film is defined by the presence of all-female spaces. In this way, Djébar is shooting a new canon of Francophone self-narratives. By placing Lila and other Algerian women at the center of the film, she re-inscribes the female voice within Algeria's history. Lila is mostly filmed outdoors, away from the domestic space that she shares with Ali. However, when she is filmed within the home, there is always a window and / or a door behind her in order to reinforce her need for freedom within this private space. The bars on the windows suggest the limits of her freedom. Ali, who has been confined to a wheel chair following a horse-back riding accident, is mostly silent during the film, and almost always filmed indoors. As a result, he appears physically and socially weak next to Lila as he remains silenced and confined to the domestic space, while the emphasis is placed on his wife and the other women of Chenoua. In contrast, the matriarch of the home is mostly filmed outside, a role reversal that announces a (temporary) rupture in the traditional gendered roles of Algerian society. Yet despite his physical weakness, Ali still possesses the power of the gaze from which Lila must escape. The narrator expresses Lila’s predicament when she states, “Veiled or unveiled it is all the same, we are constantly watched.”

When Lila shares the domestic space with Ali, she is indeed constantly scrutinized by his gaze. He watches her and their daughter Aicha in silence as they play,

bathe, and sleep. In the film chapters of *Vaste est la prison* the narrator describes the dynamic between Ali, Lila, and the gaze: “L’homme regarde sa femme, image lointaine, dormir et je le regarde la regarder” (174). As Ali watches Lila, the camera watches and films Ali: “La camera, voyeuse à son tour, suit l’homme qui se dresse sur le seuil impossible” (*Prison* 198). Similarly, the film also challenges and reverses the male gaze during a scene when a young girl looks in at Ali and watches him from outside while Ali, confined to the home, falls prey to the female gaze. In one scene, a large shadow of Lila is also cast on the wall behind Ali, which reinforces her power and strength while emphasizing Ali’s weakness. The storytelling motif also challenges patriarchal traditions by giving agency to women through language, as is demonstrated in the scene where Lila tells her daughter the story of the bride of Chenoua and the seven canopic jars. Earlier in the film, this story was told to her by Djamila’s mother during the interviews. Lila, in turn, transmits the story to her daughter. Through the process of storytelling, the film portrays a sequence of women transmitting stories orally to each other and to the next generation. This chain of orality reinforces the cultural tradition of women and storytelling, thus establishing a permanent string of female voices within the film.

### **Independence, the Postcolonial Era, and *La nouba***

When speaking of the powerful role of the camera, Jeanne-Marie Clerc states that “la camera a été cet instrument ambivalent capable de donner à voir l’intérieur et l’extérieur, le passé enfoui dans le souvenir et le présent en train de se faire à l’extérieur” (2001, 97). Similarly, Jane Hiddleston explains that “Djebar uses the camera to break

down the walls that she perceives divide Muslim Algerian society and that try to keep women cloistered away from the light. The photographic lens is compared to the small gap in the veil that is otherwise used to mask the woman's face" (100). Indeed, throughout the filming of *La nouba*, the camera lens captures the sights and sounds of quotidian, postcolonial life, including images of the ocean waves, the land, the mountains, children playing, roosters crowing, women working in the fields, a small group of musicians playing traditional, regional music, and the crackling of the outdoor cooking fire. When these familiar and friendly sights and sounds are abruptly interrupted by color footage of the war, the spectator is catapulted back in time by the violent sounds and images of bombs, guns, and planes. Devastating fires envelop the countryside as men, women, and children are heard screaming, and black and white footage introduces rows of guns and soldiers. The horrific fires of war are juxtaposed to the peaceful flames of communal fires where the women cook the daily meals.

Despite the peace and calm of quotidian life captured by the camera, specters of the colonial period are still embedded within the film. As Lila travels throughout the region of Chenoua, the narrator notes that "the soldiers' watch towers are still there, but empty," and as the voice-over is heard, the camera lens focuses on the abandoned towers. When Lila is driving in her Jeep, a bilingual road sign can be seen in the background with the word "Menaceur," a sinister symbolic reminder of the French colonial period since it looks similar to the French word "menacer" which means to threaten or intimidate someone. Finally, when the doctor comes to Lila's home to treat Ali's injury, he states that "this is our country, on these mountains we were free," thus reminding the spectators

of the revolution and the postcolonial era. Although more than a million Algerian lives were lost during the war of independence, Ali's comment reminds the spectator that the country is no longer a French colony. According to Mireille Calle-Gruber, Djébar's work as an artist is to "démasquer l'imposture et l'hypocrisie des représentations coloniales" (74). These subtle colonial elements scattered throughout the film are emblematic of the artist's desire to capture and preserve these specters of the not-so-distant colonial past.

### **The Women of Mount Chenoua**

Throughout the film, Lila interviews several women from her mother's tribe who survived the horrors and violence of the war. Through their stories, Lila reconnects with and better understands her own painful past. As she listens to their narratives, she also experiences personal healing, and is able to understand her own painful memories through the piecing together of each woman's individual story. As each interviewee unveils her story, her pain, loss, and suffering are revealed to Lila and to the spectators. As Lila embarks on her journey across Chenoua, the narrator states in the voice-over: "I am not looking for anything, but I am listening. I love to listen." It is this use of the "I" in the narration that suggests to the spectator that the anonymous voice may indeed belong to Lila. When speaking of the structure of the film, Zahia Salhi explains that it "does not only give voice to women who lived through the shattering events of the war of independence, it also records their gestures and their postures as they tell their stories" (22). Mildred Mortimer suggests that "by filming Lila's story, the camera becomes a conduit to the filmmaker's maternal past" (1996, 862). Both Salhi and Mortimer stress

the importance of women, storytelling, and film. As women tell their stories, the camera captures and records their voices, narratives, and gestures.

The name of the first interviewee is unknown and thus she is referred to just as “Djamila’s mother.” The woman is wrinkled from old age and exposure to the sun of Chenoua. Although she is not veiled, her head is partially covered by a scarf. As she tells her story within her sparsely furnished home, the camera only captures footage of women and children. Men are absent and as a result, women’s domestic space is privileged. Djamila’s mother tells Lila the story of Chenoua’s Saint. According to legend, the saint had seven wives. The seventh bride, who was exceptionally beautiful, opened some canopic jars that were meant to remain sealed. As she opened each jar, doves flew out while she danced, a metaphor for the individual’s desire for personal freedom as well as the dissemination of women’s knowledge and storytelling. By opening the jars, the young bride violates a boundary and crosses a forbidden threshold. In many ways, this bride's actions can be compared to Djébar's work as a filmmaker for it is not socially acceptable for an Algerian woman to shoot a film.

After listening to the legend, Lila moves on to her second interview with an elderly maternal cousin. This eighty-eight-year-old woman begins her interview by saying, “It started and ended with me.” In contrast to the first interview, this conversation takes place outdoors. As the woman tells her story, we learn that she helped feed guerilla soldiers during the war. Eventually her farm was burned down by the French. As she explains to Lila, “We were afraid of the enemy, they would kill you right away.” The third woman interviewed, whose name is not given, does not remember Lila,

but we learn that she hid her brother during the war. As she and Lila walk through the fields next to the sea, she talks and Lila listens: “I had four girls and a boy. I farmed the land myself. Partisans came and took food during the war.” As she talks, her voice is heard over images of the sea and the cliffs. An elderly woman referred to as “Aunt Berkani” is at the heart of the fourth interview. She tells Lila that she was accused by the French army of hiding guerilla fighters. As a result, she was captured and sent to work in a factory that made wine barrels. The two women featured in the fifth interview are only heard and not seen. We learn that the voices belong to Zoulika’s daughter and sister. They tell Lila that Zoulika was a resistance fighter who was tortured and killed. On the second day following her death, her body disappeared. The final interview features another anonymous woman whose daughter was in prison with Lila, and was only thirteen years old when she joined the guerillas. As each woman takes turns telling the story of the war from her perspective, the aggregate of these interviews alongside of Lila’s story form the fabric of a haunting feminine song, a “nouba” that is not only heard but seen through, and captured by, the lens of the camera.

*La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* is a female-directed, postcolonial film that privileges the themes of women’s solidarity, oral tradition, collectivity, space, freedom, and silence. As each of the women interviewed by Lila expressed one piece of Algeria’s broken past, Djébar herself, through the making of this film, discovered a way to overcome the sociolinguistic barriers that she created unwillingly when she wrote her first four novels in French. Following in her footsteps, another woman would also start “shooting the canon” of the postcolonial legacy, albeit more recently and quite

differently, as Yamina Benguigui demonstrates in *Mémoires d'immigrés: L'héritage maghrébin*, a three-part documentary that focuses on the concerns of first- and second-generation North-African immigrants and their French-born children.

### **Benguigui As Cine-(auto)biographer**

The wave of immigration to France from the Maghreb in the years following the end of the Second World War is the central subject of *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin*. The high demand for a large workforce from outside of the Hexagon was a response to France's economic shortage of human resources, as well as a direct result of colonization. Immigration from formerly colonized regions of the globe to the metropolis is a cultural reality that defines the postcolonial era. Thus, this concluding segment will focus on the changing face of contemporary France through the artistic expression of the children whose parents immigrated to France in the post-war period in response to France's need to rebuild the nation.

Yamina Benguigui was born in Lille, France in 1957 to Algerian parents. Unlike Assia Djebar, who was born in Algeria, Yamina Benguigui is a French citizen as well as a second-generation Algerian immigrant. As a result, she has grown up sharing the culture of France and the culture of her Algerian parents, and filmmaking has served as an important arena for the expression of her plural identity. Benguigui has been involved in documentary cinema since 1994, and was among the first French directors and producers of Algerian descent. Her films include *Mémoires d'immigrés: L'héritage maghrébin* (1997), *Women of Islam* (1999), *The Perfumed Garden* (2001) and *The Glass*

*Ceiling* (2005). In 2001, she directed her first feature, *Inch'allah dimanche*, which earned her twenty-seven awards worldwide. She is presently working on a second feature film - tentatively entitled *Le Paradis? C'est complet!* - that explores the theme of Muslim cemetery plots in France. As a result of her knowledge of immigrant populations in France, Benguigui was also appointed to the French government's Higher Council for Integration in 2006. She has received a number of prestigious national awards in France, such as the Legion of Honor and the National Order of Merit.

Yamina Benguigui's documentary<sup>60</sup> and the text that followed, also entitled *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin*, contain personal testimonies from mothers and fathers who immigrated to France in search of a better life. After representing the two, gendered sides of the stories, the third segment gives voice to the children born in France as a result of the large-scale immigration from the Maghreb which began shortly after the end of World War II. Without the artistic intervention of Benguigui, who, like Djebbar in *La nouba*, serves as a cultural intermediary, a journalist, and a biographer, the individual stories of the men and women represented in her film and book might never have been made public. According to Mark Ingram and Florence Martin (114), "In Benguigui's case, the question of audience is crucial: she wants everyone from Maghrebi descent and from French descent to witness and learn." As Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr have stated, the film was particularly significant for the women of immigrant populations and their daughters: "The work of women writers and filmmakers of immigrant origin, through the way it addresses the painful consequences of immigration

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<sup>60</sup> While *Mémoires d'immigrés* first appeared as a documentary in collaboration with Canal+, a written scenario of the work now exists under the same title.

and exile and the difficulties of integrating into metropolitan French culture, is clearly vital in validating the histories and identities of women readers and viewers of immigrant origin” (9).

In my opinion, in addition to the obvious biographical content of the novel and the film, both are implicitly autobiographical in nature. In writing about and filming those stories, Yamina Benguigui also writes about herself and her own family’s experience in France. As she explains in the Avant-Propos of the textual version, “Ce livre est le récit de mon voyage au cœur de l’immigration maghrébine en France. L’histoire des pères, des mères, des enfants, l’histoire de mon père, de ma mère. Mon histoire” (*Mémoires d’immigrés* 11). Kenneth Harrow explains that “what appears to be the daughter’s investigation into the conditions of the parents’ story of their arrival in France, their lives as immigrants struggling in a new land, becomes, when seen through this optic, the story of the subaltern daughter’s voice” (103). Like Assia Djébar, the goal of Benguigui’s project is to tell the story of the self through and alongside of the collective discourse of the men, women, and children interviewed. The motion picture screen is the ultimate artistic space in which the aggregate of these stories unfolds for a national and international public of spectators.

### **Immigrant Memories and Memoirs**

*Mémoires d’immigrés: l’héritage Maghrébin* was first shown to French television viewers across the nation in 1997, on Canal+. This three-part documentary targeted an audience of immigrant populations as well as mainstream French viewers,

sending shockwaves across French society as it brought the issue of immigration to center stage once again. Like Lila, the protagonist of *La nouba*, Benguigui listened to the men, women, and children in order to record their personal stories. While Benguigui, like Assia Djebar in *La nouba*, is not seen or heard, her presence is felt within the documentary, and the power of her documentary is in the images as well as in the discourse of the men, women, and children interviewed. Four different types of images supplement the oral accounts within the documentary: current footage of the men, women, and children interviewed in the present day by Benguigui; color footage of life back in Algeria, the farms, mountains, and peaceful way of life; black and white archival footage from the past; and black and white family photos. In addition, interviews with various government officials who played significant roles in the recruitment and the management of immigrant populations are interspersed with the personal testimonies of the first- and second-generation North Africans. The French officials are mostly portrayed in their offices, sitting comfortably behind their desks. These images are juxtaposed with the footage of the factories where the fathers labored painstakingly for years.

### **The Fathers**

The first segment of the documentary, entitled “Les pères,” takes the spectator to the beginning of the Maghrebi immigration movement. The fathers were the first to arrive in France, beginning as early as the 1950s. They were carefully selected by French recruiters who wanted men who were strong, healthy, hard-working, and unlikely to

cause social or political friction once they arrived in France. Far from their families and their homeland, the fathers worked six days a week, mainly on assembly lines in factories. Their work was dangerous, repetitive, and physically demanding. At the end of the day, they returned to shanty towns where they lived in huts surrounded by mud and barbed wire. The French government viewed them as machines rather than as men, while French society ignored their existence. The money that they earned in France was sent back to their families in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Most of the men were illiterate when they arrived in France. Many struggled to learn French independently while others took evening classes in order to learn the language of their host country. The documentary actually includes black and white footage of the men taking French classes in the evenings. Although an entire generation of Maghrebi fathers were living in France, their goal was to remain unnoticed and invisible. Passively accepting their situation in France, these men bowed their heads silently in front of the police and French authorities due to their fear of being sent back to Northern Africa. This silent apprehension of both parents (that is also reiterated by their children in the third part of the documentary) is similar to the silence of the women of Algeria in the years following the Algerian War.

### **The Mothers**

In 1974 the French government put into action *le regroupement familial*, which allowed the wives and in many cases the young children of Maghrebi workers to come to France to join their spouses who had already been working within the borders of the Hexagon for several years. The women in the second segment of the film speak of a

variety of subjects including arranged marriages, conjugal duties, the home, isolation, culture shock, raising the children, and the difficulty of adjusting to French life. Some women are filmed alone, while others are interviewed in groups of two, emphasizing solidarity and collective story-telling. As they speak, the camera captures images of the home, black and white family photos, and hanging laundry. When asked about returning to Northern Africa, one woman named Yamina Amri says, "I haven't been back in thirty-eight years. I miss Algeria." Yet, as Carrie Tarr and Jane Freedman noted in their book *Women, Immigration and Identities in France* (3), "Although women of immigrant origin find themselves at the intersection of dominations and exclusions based on gender and 'race', this does not mean that they are passive victims without voice and agency of their own." I contend that Benguigui's film represents one way for the women to assert their voice and their agency.

Many of the women express the fact that their children's lives will be different from their own. For example, the daughters typically wear European fashions, attend French schools, and earn university diplomas. When talking about her children's identity Yamina Amri states that "they are neither French nor Algerian." When discussing why the families chose to stay in France, Amri's friend, Khadija, emphasizes that they "stayed for the children." As both women speak, the camera films a passing train which becomes a visual metaphor for the immigrants and their children who are still socially, culturally, and psychologically in transit between France and the Maghreb. This second segment of the film ends with a government official stating that the French never imagined that a second generation of children would emerge. Black and white photos of the children are

captured by the camera in order to prepare the spectator for part three of the documentary which focuses on the children. Their arrival has led to a new generation of French citizens with plural identities, cultures, and languages.

### **Second-Generation Immigrants, Literature, and Film**

Throughout the documentary, the French officials repeatedly express the fact that they never foresaw the "arrival" of a second generation of immigrants, for the government, like the immigrants themselves, believed that the workers would one day return to Northern Africa. Thus, from an administrative point of view, the emergence of an entire generation of French-born children of North African descent represents an unexpected socio-cultural phenomenon. In society and in the media, the children of immigrants are commonly referred to as *les Beurs*. As Sylvie Durmelat explains, "Selon la doxa, le mot *beur*, Verlan d'arabe, désigne un groupe de personnes d'origine maghrébine, plus précisément issues de l'immigration maghrébine, nées, ou du moins ayant grandi en France, et ayant fait leur apprentissage scolaire en France" (195). As a group, *les Beurs* represent a new socio-political and demographic category of French citizens which has resulted in the genesis of a social space defined as Beur culture. The written texts and cinematographic productions of the children of immigrants, like Yamina Benguigui herself, often reflect their status of being caught between a French culture in which they are marginalized and the Maghrebi nations of their parents. The act of making public their stories is a form of resistance, revolt, self-invention, and agency since in doing so, they negotiate for cultural dialogism both within and beyond artistic space.

When speaking of the marginalization of second-generation immigrants and their writing, Azouz Begag emphasizes that “il est nécessaire de faire entrer dans le monde de la normalité le fait de s'appeler Ali ou Leïla et d'être en même temps Français, personnage d'une histoire du roman. De ce point de vue-là, le roman pour la jeunesse est un bon outil de lutte contre la xénophobie” (76). In this way, *les Beurs* and their novels can serve as cultural intermediaries bridging the former North African colonies and France. One important dimension of Beur cinema and literature is thus the exploration of how these children negotiate several plural identities in a society where secular universalism is promoted as one of the central values of the nation. The motion picture screen is a way for the children of North African immigrants, like Yamina Benguigui herself, to find a collective voice and identity in a culture where they have consistently been pushed to the periphery. It is also an artistic space for the cultural clamor that is juxtaposed to the silence of the previous generation.

Farid Laroussi explains that "between 1983 and 2000, more than 80 novels and diaries authored by Beur writers were published in France" (709). What is particularly interesting to me is the fact that the great majority of these published works was autobiographical in nature. Beur novels and films form a cultural intersection that bridges France and the Maghreb within artistic space. Beur writing is also linguistically innovative, as elements of Berber, Verlan, Arabic, and Parisian or Lyonnais slang are woven into the traditional French that is taught in the French school system. Living with a plural identity is a reality at the heart of Beur culture often causing confusion and feelings of marginalization. At the same time, Beur writers are establishing their own

canon or unique space somewhere between (or within) the fields of French and Francophone Studies, and scholars cannot ignore the fact that *les Beurs* are making films and publishing a great number of texts that relate their experiences as well as those of their parents.

Generally speaking, Beur novels and films include themes such as the suffering of the parents, fear of the police, race relations in France, social marginalization, life in the *banlieue*, poverty and social class, their *scolarité* in the French school system, and their desire to write. By making public their life-writings, they open up a space for cultural dialogism both within and beyond literary space. This new body of autobiographical writing reveals the experiences and the concerns of this second generation while also telling the stories of their parents. Since the literature itself is marginal and non-canonical, it is frequently considered unworthy of serious study by scholars who are strongly rooted in canonical traditions. While Beur literature and film do not (yet) belong to the traditional French literary canon, the artistic production and expression of *les Beurs* can no longer be ignored by the fields of French and Francophone Studies. According to Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr, “Benguigui’s intervention provides a powerful space for mediation, bridging the gap between the second generation and their parents as well as between ‘French’ citizens and ‘immigrant’ Others” (9).

### **The Children: We Are Not *Racaille***

The adult children and adolescents portrayed in the third part of Benguigui’s documentary express many of the typical themes found in Beur novels. Most of the

children were born in France, but some were born in the Maghreb and brought to France at a young age. Part three features two age groups or generations of children. The children in their late 20s and 30s are juxtaposed to their younger brothers and sisters in their teens in order to show the differences in attitudes. Both groups of children express an identity crisis and feelings of marginalization from mainstream society. In addition, they demonstrate frustration with the fact that they are constantly on display and scrutinized by society. The children of immigrants often take on adult roles and responsibilities at a young age, acting as linguistic and cultural intermediaries between the French administration and their parents. Other common themes are *le mythe du retour*, fear of the authorities, the silence and suffering of the parents, and the vast social and cultural gap between the parents and their children.

Throughout the third segment of the documentary, Benguigui interviews a group of adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18 years old who are filmed sitting outside against a wall in the projects. At first glance, they seem like average teenagers from any society. They are interested in personal dress and style, slang, music, and spending time with friends. Segments of this group interview are interspersed with the interviews of the adult children in their late 20s and 30s. The younger children seem less angry than their older brothers and sisters. However, when speaking about identity, traditions and the Maghreb, they have a variety of opinions and often seem more confused and conflicted than the older children when responding. These discrepancies between the older and young children indicate that the notion of identity changes with each generation. When speaking of her feelings toward the Maghreb, one girl says, “I have the mentality but I

couldn't live there." They make a point to emphasize that they are different from other youths their own age in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, citing differences in accent and the clothes they wear. However, they are also different from mainstream French kids. As one girl says, "I am not the same as Magali, Stéphanie, and Aurore." This young woman's words describe the cultural void separating her from other girls that she identifies as mainstream. As the film progresses, the group of children continue to discuss a variety of cultural topics such as how they view Islam. Some of the adolescents do not know much about Islam while others observe Ramadan each year. One girl shares that French kids ask her repeatedly if she is hungry during Ramadan. This statement shows that the children find themselves facing the dilemma of observing the traditions of their parents and fitting in with mainstream or traditional French children at school.

When asked about their social status, one of the girls emphatically states that they "are not *racaille*." The group quickly distinguishes themselves from the thieves and dealers who are looked down on by society. Even though they live in the projects and are the children of immigrants, they want the viewers of the documentary to know that they are not deviants or delinquents. Another girl talks about the fact that French youths think it is cool to be Muslim, citing the example that they like the hand of Fatma that is sometimes featured in pieces of jewelry. This story is reminiscent of the amulets worn by Assia Djebar as described in Chapter 3. One girl talks about holidays in France, explaining that they have a Christmas tree, and that they hide eggs at Easter, which makes another girl laugh at her. She defensively says that it is for the younger children

and that these are traditions that they have adapted to in France rather than religious activities. As another girl concludes, “I don’t feel like the daughter of immigrants.”

### **Interview 1: Mounsi**

The first individual interview is with a well-known Beur writer and musician named Mounsi who openly discusses his life as a delinquent. Ironically, he explains that delinquency saved him from repeating the mistakes of his father’s generation. Mounsi characterizes the parents as fearful, silent, and invisible. Writing saved him, he claims, and became a way of overcoming the violence and suffering that he experienced while living in a shanty town. Thus, his ability to express himself through art provided this second-generation immigrant with a creative means of channeling his anger and fear. The family’s extreme poverty becomes most apparent when he tells a story of how, at the age of ten, he and his father went together to the public baths. In order to save money, they shared the same shower, and he remembered being ashamed, hoping that none of his friends would see him. Shame and humiliation characterizes the lives of not only the parents but their children who continue the legacy of the first generation. Mounsi then talks about the small, simple pleasures that the immigrant families relied on to survive, such as music, the radio, and drinking coffee or tea. Like Yamina Benguigui, Mounsi turned to writing as a form of resistance and as a way to express his feelings of marginality.

**Interview 2: Ahmed Djamai**

The second interviewee is a handsome young man in his late 20s named Ahmed Djamai who is filmed dressed in Levis, a white shirt, and a black leather vest. His European clothing indicates his desire to adopt certain Western values. During the interview, Djamai takes the spectators on a tour of a space under a bridge near the train tracks that used to be the site of the *cit  de transit* where he lived for eighteen years. With notable frustration and confusion, he states that “it was only supposed to be temporary, only six months.” As he speaks, black and white footage of the shanty town is shown. The spectator is confronted with images of children playing on a muddy terrain surrounded by barbed wire. When talking about these living conditions Djamai explains, “It was normal to us, we accepted it. Our only escape was school.” In making this statement, Djamai introduces the spectators to the theme of *scolarit *. The French school system played an integral role in the daily lives of second-generation immigrants for it was in school that they learned how to read and write in French. Djamai then talks about how the police and the camp managers insulted their parents: “The problem started when we started to fight back.” After talking about the identity crisis for kids of his generation he then asks: “What is integration?” When asked about identity, he describes himself as French, but a French Muslim. When mainstream French society began calling them immigrants, they didn’t know what that meant. They were born in France, spoke French, and went to French school. With sarcasm and resentment, he says that he was always called an immigrant until the day when he was old enough to be eligible for the French

military. At that point, he was viewed by the government as “French” rather than as an “immigrant.”

### **Interview 3: Soraya Guezlane**

Soraya Guezlane’s story begins with an image of her, dressed in legal attire, walking down the steps of Lyon’s Palais de Justice. With the backdrop of volumes of books from the legal canon, Guezlane describes that when she was young her mother woke her up at 5:00 a.m. to do the housework before going to school. In addition to helping with the house, she raised her younger brothers and sisters: “I already lived maternity as an older sister. I met with their teachers, helped them with their school work.” Her story reveals a reality lived by many second-generation immigrants who found themselves playing adult roles at a young age. Guezlane also talks about the myth of return as a theme of everyday life within her family. The parents were convinced that one day, the family would return to Algeria. The myth that the family would one day return to the Maghreb kept the children in a psychological state of unrest for they never knew when they would be uprooted. The silence of the parents often resulted in a failure to speak of Islam or of their North African roots. When discussing her parents’ heritage and origins, Guezlane explains that she “knew nothing of their culture.” She further adds, however, “I realized that their culture was my roots.” Guezlane also discusses the fact that she and other children of immigrants are growing tired of continuously performing and demonstrating that they are not illiterate and they do not belong to the category of

“racaille” referred to by the younger children. The need to perform and to constantly prove oneself is thus another daily reality faced by the children of immigrants.

#### **Interview 4: Rachid Kaci**

The dominant theme of Rachid Kaci’s interview is his father’s silent suffering and humiliation. According to Kaci, his father swept the street, emptied garbage cans, and felt ashamed in front of his children because he knew he was capable of so much more. The description of his father sweeping the street is reminiscent of the street sweeper discussed by Véronica in Chapter 2. In both instances, the street sweeper is looked down upon in society and simultaneously rendered invisible. Much like Ahmed Djamai, Kaci noticed from a young age the subtle forms of discrimination that emanated from mainstream French society. He explains the anger that he felt when his father’s boss used “tu” instead of “vous” when speaking with his father. Thus, language represented a way for the dominant society to marginalize the members of the first generation. Kaci’s father, who was constantly afraid of the government and the French authorities, accepted this treatment and never protested. Like Soraya Guezlane, Kaci discusses *le mythe du retour*. It is easy for the spectator to comprehend that the fear of instant deportation and *le mythe du retour* were common leitmotifs of immigrant families. The children waited to someday return to the Maghreb with their parents, who simultaneously lived with the fear of deportation. These two discourses placed the children in a psychological holding pattern since they never really knew if they were staying or going. As Kaci remembers his father saying, “They don’t need us anymore, we will be leaving soon.” Although

Kaci states that he is generally a happy individual, he is haunted by his father's suffering: "The silence of my father is extremely noisy in my head." Thus his father's suffering is also a part of Kaci's identity and daily life. When speaking of equality and integration in France, Kaci adds that "it will always be twice as hard for a guy named Mohammed than for a guy named Michel."

### **Interview 5: Warda Hissar Houli**

The last interview takes place in the home of Warda's Hissar Houli. As Warda begins to tell her story, the camera films a piano, a statue, and other small trinkets. These objects, captured by the camera, bring forth her individuality and her humanity. One cannot help but think of the striking difference between the comfort of her apartment and the black and white images of the fathers in the shanty towns. She explains that until the age of eighteen she always felt Algerian. However, when she became old enough to enroll at the university of Algiers, she realized that the Algeria that she had always imagined to exist did not correspond to reality. When speaking of the culture gap between immigrants and French society, Houli remembers how she had to attend a dinner party with her father that was hosted by some of his French colleagues from work. Her father asked her go in place of her mother, since he could not take his traditional, Algerian wife to such an event. His French colleagues teased him at dinner because his eighteen-year-old daughter did not drink wine like other French girls her age. In order to fit in with his French colleagues, he poured her some Champagne, saying it was okay to drink since "it technically wasn't wine." As Houli describes the event, black and white

family photos are shown. What Benguigui makes clear is that children like Houli and Guezlane were often forced to play adult, and often inappropriate, roles at a young age. Raising the younger children and attending dinner parties for their parents are two such examples. At the end of her interview, Houli also talks about murders against young Arabs in France, and how she became involved in the anti-racism movement. As a result, she actively advocates the rights of immigrants from North Africa and their children. Houli also introduces the spectators to *La marche des Beurs*<sup>61</sup> and the way in which this political demonstration of human rights impacted France.

### **Analysis of Interviews: Can The Subaltern Speak Through Films?**

When speaking of Benguigui's documentary, Kenneth Harrow asks, "Can the 'Beur' daughter speak for her parents within the context of their immigrant status in France?" (103). This statement echoes the themes of Spivak's pivotal essay "Can The Subaltern Speak?" As Harrow further explains, "What appears to be the daughter's investigation into the conditions of the parents' story of their arrival in France, their lives as immigrants struggling in a new land, becomes, when seen through this optic, the story of the subaltern daughter's voice" (103). This collection of interviews from the second generation presents the spectators with a mosaic of cultural perspectives from children of immigrants. However, as Harrow contends, this chorus of voices simultaneously tells the

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<sup>61</sup> *La marche des Beurs* was a nation-wide demonstration for equality that took place in France in 1983 in response to a significant increase in violence against immigrants. It was the first national demonstration against racism in France and relied in part on the teachings and rhetoric of Martin Luther King.

story of the filmmaker Yamina Benguigui. Thus, the artistic medium of the documentary is a space where the biographical and the autobiographical collaborate and collide.

For both Assia Djébar and Yamina Benguigui, the camera and the screen have served as artistic mediums to convey historical, fictional, and autobiographical narratives. In doing so, both filmmakers have established an artistic canon of personal and collective autobiographical expression through the shooting of film footage. In the documentary *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, Assia Djébar honors Yasmina Oudaï and many other women who fought for Algeria's right to be an independent nation free from colonial rule. In addition to serving as a eulogy honoring the dead, Djébar's film provided the survivors of the war with a platform for portraying the self. Similarly, Yamina Benguigui's documentary opened up an artistic space for two generations of Maghrebi immigrants within which their personal and collective stories were both seen and heard by the entire French nation. By shooting new artistic canons, the rhetoric of the images and sound of Djébar's and Benguigui's autobiographical cinema achieve what the pen and page cannot. Through their images, sound, and interviews, documentaries transmit the life narratives of subaltern groups with varying degrees of literacy to audiences around the world, as a new way for the Beur generation to find a collective voice and an identity in a culture where they have consistently been denied access.

Together, as I hope to have shown, the selected texts and films of Simone de Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn, Maryse Condé, Assia Djébar, and Yamina Benguigui create a *métissage* of autobiographical forms while contributing to the emerging autobiographical canon of "Great Women." The architects of their own literary and

cinematographic space, French-speaking women of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continue to employ the pen and the camera lens to record their life narratives, and in doing so, they are creating a canon of their own .

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