

Family Time: The Bonds and Bondage of Transnational Francophone Kinship

by

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Dedication

To three men in my life:
my dad, who gave me my love for books;
Rocco, who keeps me grounded;
and Chris, with whom I spent the summer that changed everything.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	vii
Introduction – Why Study Kinship?: The Power and Politics of Family	1
Chapter One – Gender Dissonance: Maternal Bonds and Gendered Bondage in Mother-Daughter Relationships	22
Chapter Two – Divorce and Alternate Bonds of Paternity: The Bondage of Intersectional Masculinity and <i>Saudade</i>	66
Chapter Three – Surrogacy: Temporary Familial Bonds and the Bondage of Origins	109
Chapter Four – Familial Estrangement: The Bondage of Separation and the Impossibility of Return	157
Epilogue – On <i>Becoming</i> and Becoming Family	198
Works Cited	203

Abstract

This dissertation examines cultural depictions of immigrant families that lie at the intersection of the Francophone Maghreb and France. Throughout, it conceives of a *transnational/cultural* family that stretches the boundaries of previous notions of kinship. Some of these families have immigrated from North Africa to Europe, others have roots in North Africa and seek to return from their time in a “host” country to the “homeland,” and a third category finds itself split or divided by the Mediterranean Sea. This study reads these families using the vocabulary of *bonds* and *bondage* to conceive of relationships differently and move past previous binaries of family vs. not family, normal vs. abnormal, assimilated vs. unassimilated, etc. These ideas that can be found in more detail in the project’s introduction.

Chapter one examines Nina Bouraoui’s *La voyageuse interdite* (1991) and argues maternally-enforced forms of gendered bondage are disguised as gender bonds. The novel’s protagonist seeks solidarity to avoid the slippage between bond and bondage at three sites of rupture in her relationship with her mother: birth, menstruation, and marriage. Chapter two focuses on divorce and paternity in Azouz Begag’s *Salam Ouessant* (2012). Here, the protagonist struggles to form intimate bonds with his daughters because he is impeded by his intersectional position as a North African, immigrant, masculine man and experiences with *saudade*. Chapter three is dedicated to an analysis of Fouad Laroui’s coming-of-age story, *Une année chez les Français* (2010). It posits that this Bildungsroman complicates the relationship between “family” and “familiar” and concludes that the bonds the protagonist forms in his surrogate family remain inadequate, due to the bondage of his origins, despite how familiar they may feel. Chapter four

takes up Leïla Sebbar's *Mon cher fils* (2009) and reimagines familial estrangement. Instead of portraying estrangement as the product of a "lack," the novel requires that it be understood as a force that exerts pressure on the lives of the characters. Finally, the epilogue examines previous theories of *becoming*, including those of Simone de Beauvoir, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Rosi Braidotti. It ties the notion of *becoming* to the rest of the dissertation and asks what it means to become family.

Introduction

Why Study Kinship?: The Power and Politics of Family

Nous voudrions ici suivre l'évolution de la famille algérienne, sa mutation, ses grands changements à l'occasion et au cours de la guerre de Libération.

Le point le plus important, nous semble-t-il, de cette modification est que la famille, homogène et quasi monolithique, se brise. Chaque élément de cette famille gagne en personnalité ce qu'il perd en appartenence à un monde de valeurs plus ou moins confuses. Des personnes particulières se trouvent confrontées à des options, à des choix nouveaux. (89-90)

-- Frantz Fanon "La Famille algérienne" (1959)

We would like here to trace the evolution of the Algerian family, its transformation, the great modifications it has undergone because of and in the course of the war for liberation.

The most important point of this modification, it seems to us, is that the family, from being homogenous and virtually monolithic, has broken up into separate elements. Each member of the family has gained in individuality what it has lost in its belonging to a world of more or less confused values. Individual persons have found themselves facing new choices, new decisions. (Chevalier 99)

In his essay "La Famille algérienne" (1959), Frantz Fanon examined how the Algerian War for Independence affected the structure of families in Algeria, and he implied that the Algerian family was *progressing* toward an unspoken ideal. Fanon's observations about the Algerian family use language of "evolution" and "transformation" to argue that kinship in Algeria had begun to approximate notions of family in the West more closely: that is to say, the family had become more about independent people with choices and decisions. Although the title of Fanon's essay would indicate otherwise, his study deprioritized the role of kinship in favor of the individual and he analyzed the family insofar as what it could tell him about individuality in Algeria.

In this regard, Fanon is not unique. For decades, the family was a subject of European psychoanalytic inquiry, only because it contributed to better understanding an individual.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the impulse to use the family in order to propose theories that explain the behaviors of larger units, such as whole communities or societies, is also prevalent. For example, from the very beginning of Freud's essay on "family romance," it is evident that his study of familial relationships is intended to shed light on the individual or on society; the family itself is not actually the locus of his concern:

The separation of the individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary achievements of his development, yet at the same time one of the most painful. It is absolutely necessary for it to take place, and we may presume that it has been achieved in some measure by everyone who has developed into a normal person. Indeed, the progress of society in general rests upon the opposition between the generations. (37)

Here, as we saw with Fanon, Freud relies on the discourse of progress to make his argument. The gendered language of the essay aside, Freud seems to be arguing that adequate separation of the individual from his kin and familial conformity underpin the very bedrock of social progress and development. The 19th and 20th centuries are riddled with anthropological studies, from Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1948) and Clifford Geertz's *Kinship in Bali* (1975), where kinship, and especially the kinship of minority populations, is examined for the insights it could provide into understanding communities. In this study, I aim to do the opposite and study kinship solely for what it tells us about family and relationships.

This study begins by asserting that family is a crucial unit of inquiry and that we should reprioritize analysis of kinship, not for what it can tell us about something else, but for what it can tell us about kinship. Whether we are talking about Fanon's observations regarding changes in the Algerian family or about contemporary political debates on marriage, immigration, and custody rights, conversations about family are about power. The assumption that all families aspire to a kinship arrangement based on the normative, nuclear, individuality-based model of

family in the mainstream West is a colonizing assumption. I propose thinking about family differently in an effort to decolonize families that do not conform to dominant discourses on kin and family values. Put differently, my analysis develops an alternative method for thinking about kinship in an effort to establish a reading of family that does not contain the violence of examining it according to how closely it conforms to the central model. By making families central to my analysis, rather than using them as a tool for understanding something larger or smaller, I hope to create a framework for understanding families that have been traditionally misrecognized by dominant social forces.

The family is located at a unique position, where it has the potential to destabilize the common binary of public versus private; it is simultaneously a part of the private lives of individuals and the foundation upon which social values and policy decisions are built. As Rayna Rapp has argued in her comparative essay “Toward a Nuclear Freeze? The Gender Politics of Euro-American Kinship Analysis,” the family unit in both the U.S. and Europe has undergone a process of politicization since the Second World War. She also points out that familial transformation is often culturally labeled a “decline” (130). In France, these changes to the family are due to a large variety of factors, including the entry of women in the workforce *en masse*, the passage of the so-called marriage-for-all law, or Taubira Act, which extended legal marriage rights to France’s gay and lesbian population (Perreau), and the transformation and urbanization of France’s population thanks to processes of migration and immigration.

Starting in the wake of the First World War and the casualties suffered by the French, people began immigrating from the former French colonies to France; the number of immigrants in France then increased dramatically at the end of the Second World War. During the period of reconstruction, many of those people were men who constituted a large portion of the French

labor force. However, in the mid-1970s, due to France's *regroupement familial* policies, the immigrant labor force that resided legally in France began to sponsor the immigration of relatives. As people were joined by their family members who fit the necessary criteria, the Francophone immigrant family came under French scrutiny. Therefore, it underwent the same politicization Rapp describes in her analysis of Euro-American kinship. These *regroupement* policies are perhaps one of the most striking examples of how families can be defined by legal mechanisms. While they are portrayed as benign or even compassionate efforts on the government's behalf to reunite workers with their immediate families who live on separate sides of national boundaries, they were initially conceived to encourage and expedite immigrant assimilation (Higbee 18).

Since then, these policies have been the subject of critique because they impose reductive ideations of kinship onto families that likely did not or do not conceive of their structure in this manner. Individuals who live at a point of intersection between France and its former colonies have used their cultural products to make arguments about the challenges that arise when people have their family defined from them and then legally sanctioned by external forces. For example, in 2001, producer Yamina Benguigui took on *regroupement familial* directly in her film *Inch'Allah Dimanche*. The film begins with text that gives the viewer some background facts, establishing the history of these policies. In the first few scenes, Benguigui then de-romanticizes the policies by showing that the film's protagonist, Zouina, was forced to leave her mother behind in order to begin living with her husband, Ahmed, and her mother-in-law in France. Upon her reunification with her husband, she has not seen him in years and he is essentially a stranger who mistreats her. The *regroupement familial* policies limited the possibility of immigration to Ahmed's immediate family (defined as his wife, their children, and his mother). According to

French law, his mother-in-law (Zouina's mother) is not part of his immediate family and, therefore, she is ineligible for sponsorship. Thus, Zouina and her children are cleaved from their kin (her mother and her children's grandmother) semi-forcibly due to arbitrary restrictions. Benguigui's film highlights the manner in which French policies that define family on behalf of its immigrant population result in a violence through which Zouina is stripped of her own family and the support it had previously offered her.¹

Even once immigrant families are established in France, policymakers determine the success of those families according to their degree of assimilation; a variety of legal and economic policies based on presumptions of an aspiration towards nuclearity continues to alter their shape and structure. For example, scholar Loretta Bass has explained that the French government has unintentionally created an incentive for immigrant (and, lower-income, more broadly defined) fathers to live at an address separate from that of their children. When designing economic policies such as the *allocation familiale (CAF)*,² French officials made an assumption that if fathers support their children financially, or if they are involved with the mothers of their children romantically, they will opt to live at the same address. In her book, *African Immigrant Families in Another France: Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship*, Bass explains:

Men, described by one migrant woman as “phantom fathers,” are not a major presence in these African immigrant family homes. The French social welfare system may make it economically advantageous for the father to live elsewhere and, therefore, there is a push factor built in, which has the unintended consequence of weakening family cohesion. (44)

¹ For more information on *Inch'Allah Dimanche* and films that make similar interventions, see Will Higbee's *Post-beur Cinema: North African Émigré and Maghrebi-French Filmmaking in France since 2000*.

² Branch of the French social security system charged with disbursing financial assistance to individuals and families.

Bass goes on to explain that French politicians have responded to the increasing number of non-nuclear or non-*Français de souche*³ families by problematizing or pathologizing them.⁴ (Even Bass assumes that families in which fathers live at a separate address are necessarily less “cohesive.”) In a final example, French laws that regulate family structures, such as those that refuse to recognize polygyny (because they, again, project aspirations of nuclearity on to immigrant populations), can cause family in-fighting and pregnancy rivalries as women in multiple-wife households attempt to gain their husband’s favor and secure their immigration status. French society then responds (to a situation it created indirectly) by problematizing immigrant fertility in public discourse (Bass 45).

Queer anthropologists such as Kath Weston and humanists such as David L. Eng and Elizabeth Freeman have begun the work of studying family as an independent unit, or of seeing kinship relationships as independent sets of structures. Like Weston, Eng, and Freeman, I argue for an alternative conceptualization of kinship; one that, in my case, re-examines families that live at the crossroads of France and the former French colonies. Rather than thinking about the family as a sovereign site for the Foucauldian disciplining of individuals,⁵ I argue that families themselves have been and are continually disciplined. Specific iterations of family are legitimized, and even legalized, by hegemonic forces. This process leaves non-conforming families disenfranchised. Thus, a study of family is a study of the false public versus private binary, of the discourses that give preference to particular visions of family, and of the human

³ Controversial expression that refers to individuals who have French nationality and do not have any immediate ancestors who were not French. It is often used in opposition to *Français de papier*, which refers to someone who is French thanks to paperwork.

⁴ Mehammed Amadeus Mack has shown how much of this pathologizing language of Maghrebi families and sexualities is the legacy of the Algiers School. See “Constructing the Broken Family: The Draw for Psychoanalysis” in *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture* (2017).

⁵ For an overview of Foucault’s studies of the family, see Chloë Taylor’s “Foucault and Familial Power” (2012).

rights implications of asking families to conform to a particular model. It also shows how imagining families differently opens up the possibility of new spaces of agency for both family units and individuals who see representation of their lived realities as “a matter of life or death, or at least trauma, as well as maneuvers of survival” (Provencher 48).⁶

Bond and Bondage

In order to make my argument, I propose that the kinship structures illustrated in the corpus I have defined should be read by imagining them as the product of a host of bonds and sites of bondage. I propose that we see families as constantly in flux and as the product of, first, bonds between individuals that get strengthened and weakened by a variety of factors and that are perpetually changing in both appearance and in the way they effect families and the members that make them up; and second, bondage that is internal within family dynamics, that can be traced to external sources, and that is a product of both internal and external factors. I elaborate on each below.

Throughout this study, the bonds I reference are the product of shared or mirrored experiences, loyalties, mutual understanding, love and compassion, and the drive protagonists and characters have to connect with one another. Each bond between individuals in these texts signals a point of encounter that transforms into an emotional tie. The relationships of characters can then be imagined as a web of the residual effects of the bonds and moments of interaction. While bonds are formed thanks to sites of connection, they do not rely on interdependence in order to continue existing. Instead, they are strengthened and fed by any combination of the

⁶ These are the stakes Provencher delimits of his concept of *transfiliation*, which he argues “involves the creation of filial ties through subversive and transgressive artistic and cultural productions, and the transmission of those models across genres and generations of producers and consumers, and across transnational networks of communication” (46-47).

products listed above. As we will see in chapter four, I argue that even the most counter-intuitive of forces, estrangement, can lead to the evolution and strengthening of bonds once they are established.

Bondage, on the other hand, relies on interdependence. The connotation of the word is often negative or even sinister,⁷ but I elaborate a version of bondage that refers to a link, transformed into an inescapable pressure. At times, the bondage experienced by the protagonists of this corpus comes from within them or can be traced back to their personal histories. In other instances, bondage is more likely the result of someone else's actions or views. It can be authoritative, but it is often, whether consciously or sub-consciously, consented to. Put differently, bondage does not require the absolute power of one individual, group, or system over another who is non-agentic, and it is sometimes the result of a conflict that is contained within one individual who is navigating the relationship between his/her own control and powerlessness.

The more one thinks about relationships or families in using bonds and bondage, the harder it becomes to tease apart exactly what is a bond and what is the product of bondage. In the texts I examine, bonds and bondage exist in tension with one another, but there is also a tremendous amount of slippage between the two. The cultural products examined in this dissertation contain scenes where a bond or form of bondage is highlighted, only to have it questioned shortly thereafter. In her study, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, Jessica Benjamin reads Freud's theory of authority and provides insight into what is at stake when examining the role of bonds and bondage:

In truth, Freud's understanding of authority is more complex than this choice [between

⁷ There are, of course, exceptions. *Family Time* does not examine bondage and its role in eroticism. For a study of the relationship between bondage, power, and the erotic, see David M. Ortmann and Richard A. Sprott's *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities* (2013).

instinct and civilization] suggests. He does take into account what we may call the culture's "erotic" means of binding individuals in spite of their resistance. Obedience to the laws of civilization is first inspired, not by fear or prudence, Freud tells us, but by love, love for those early powerful figures who demand obedience. [...] Freud has thus given us a basis for seeing domination as a problem not so much of human nature as of human relationships—the interaction between the psyche and social life. It is a problem that must be defined not simply in terms of aggression and civilized constraints, but as an extension of the bonds of love. (4-5)

Benjamin's arguments illustrate how bonds are produced by love, but how subservience is also the product of love. Familial love results in familial bondage, or the interplay that exists between bond and bondage, that eventually leads to an inability to distinguish between the two.

Family Time in its Context: Situating this Study and its Terms

I also describe the cultural products in my corpus, as well as the families they depict, as *Francophone*. In the most literal sense, it refers to spoken use of the French language, despite a tendency in the academy to deploy the term in describing text and seems to imply a linguistic identity that spans racial, socioeconomic, or geographic categories, invoking a kind of unity propelled by the French language. However, the authors of my corpus subvert the linguistic vision of the term Francophone along two axes. First, many authors choose to write in French not because they feel they belong to a shared Francophone identity, but *in spite of* their perceived exclusion from it. Sometimes, French is not the language they feel most comfortable in, or even the one in which they conduct their day-to-day lives, yet they choose to write in it anyway. As Subha Xavier has shown in *The Migrant Text: Making and Marketing a Global French Literature*, the decision of authors who have multiple languages at their disposal to write in French is often "carefully thought out" because "to pick up the pen in the language of the former colonizer or slave owner [...] is not without its political and cultural burdens. Appropriating a language, making it one's own to tell a different story, however, is not without its freedom and

[...] its rewards” (4). Second, not a single one of the texts included in this dissertation is written entirely in French; the authors I examine strategically include Arabic words, phrases, and sentences represented by italicized roman letters. Thus, I use the word Francophone to refer to my texts even though many of them are written post-monolingually (Forsdick 252), that is to say, not entirely in French, and even though they resist the linguistic unity connoted in this first usage of the term.

In the second usage of *Francophone*, the connotation is that it refers specifically to French-speaking populations other than those who inhabit European, continental France. In this use, *Francophone* is defined in opposition to *French*. This use of Francophone is fruitful in its invocation of the postcolonial and acknowledgement of the fact that not all French-speaking individuals have access to France, French national identity, or French citizenship. It has the possibility of gesturing at the “complex genealogies of ‘Francophone’ literatures and an acknowledgement of a sociology of literature that recognises the residual asymmetries that continue to regulate the globalised mechanisms of cultural circulation and exchange” (Forsdick 257). Again, this particular vision of Francophone has limited use when examining the texts included in this dissertation; the authors of these books and the protagonists they have created do not inhabit a Francophone world that exists in opposition to continental France. Instead, their lived experiences are better described as a cultural no-man’s-land or, perhaps, a both-man’s-land that consists of hybridity, competing influences, alternate spaces that exist outside of binaries, and mixing.

My use of the word *Francophone* more closely aligns with recent trends in academic scholarship that have re-imagined limiting categories of inquiry. In other words, this study is not a Maghrebi, French, Francophone or Beur Studies project, nor is it a study of diaspora; however,

it uses elements of each to produce a new theory of what it means for something to be Francophone. Throughout each of the following chapters, *Francophone* has a subtly different meaning: it refers to a series of postcolonial legacies in chapter one, to the development of a new group of immigrants who are more aptly referred to as transmigrants (Schiller et al.)⁸ and to discourses of multiculturalism in chapter two, to the process of constant renewal in Francophone identity formation in chapter three, and to the wounds, memories, and loss that have been experienced throughout the Francophone world in chapter four. I suggest that the term Francophone should refer to something messier than the two commonly accepted definitions outlined above; it should refer to the world created by multiplicities, fractures, and fissures, and by cultures that have mutually imprinted on one another and continue to do so. I deploy the term, messy as it may be, because it gestures at the aftermath of French colonization and French cultural infusion into the colonial world better than any other term.

Another concept that is critical to my analysis is that which I have come to call the *transnational/cultural*. I borrow the *transnational* portion of my term from transnational feminist theory, which defines itself, in part, against the international feminist movement:

Another intellectual and political movement that draws upon earlier formulations of a global sisterhood has taken root in the academy in the 1990s through discussions about international feminism. [...] “International” feminism embraces an approach of the articulation of many voices to specify an inclusive feminism—calls for “global sisterhood” are often premised on a center/periphery model where women of color or Third World women constitute the periphery. Race is invariably erased from any conception of the international (based on nation, devoid of race), all the more so because of a strict separation between the international and the domestic, or an understanding of the ways in which they are mutually constituted. To a large extent, underlying the conception of the international is a notion of universal patriarchy operating in a transhistorical way to subordinate all women. [...]

⁸ In their co-authored article, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration,” Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc show how the ability of migrants to “maintain multiple linkages” and contribute to “an important transnational process that reflects and contributes to the current political configurations of the emerging global economy” (48) has necessarily called for a new way of imagining contemporary immigrant populations.

Missing from these definitions of “international” (what we refer to as “transnational from now on) are at least three elements: 1) a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in *different* geographical spaces, rather than as *all* women across the world; 2) an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than a set of traits embodied in all non-U.S. citizens (particularly because U.S. citizenship continues to be premised within a white, Eurocentric, masculinist, heterosexist regime); and 3) a consideration of the term “international” in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes which foreground the operations of race and capitalism (for instance, those which would therefore require taking antiracist, anti-capitalist positions that would make feminist solidarity work possible). (Alexander xviii-xix)

In keeping with the definition of transnational feminism established above, I seek to think of the families I examine in this study as *transnational*, rather than *international*, because I hope to re-invite the complex questions of race, gender and embodiment, and intersectional positionality into my analysis. I seek to move away from the center versus periphery binary that transnational feminists have identified and develop a more nuanced analysis of the kinship structures that are imagined and advocated for in these literary works.

I add to my descriptor the word *cultural* for three reasons: first, because I believe that these families exist at the intersection of cultural models in addition to national boundaries; second, because notions of kinship and family values are so often tied up in discourses of cultural values; and third, because of the unique French and Francophone context of my work. As Dominic Thomas has shown in *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism*, the French imaginary suggests that it has evolved into a color-blind republic “in which ethnicity is secondary to the integrational demands and requirements” (35). In other words, the dominant discourse is that, in France, racism does not exist and that discrimination happens on the basis of lack of integration or cultural “backwardness.” As a result, I have arrived at the term *transnational/cultural* to refer to the group of literary families that make up this study.

Efforts to examine the cultural products of the Francophone world using theories of transculturality⁹ are already underway. These studies (including my own) are deeply indebted to their predecessors in the field who worked to develop what has now come to be known as the field of Beur Studies.¹⁰ Perhaps the most famous, Alec G. Hargreaves, bore witness to the creation of his field with publications on literary representations of identity formation, such as *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices From the North African Community in France* (1991), and edited collections, such as *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (1997), that examined the cultural production of the Beur population. These texts examine the experiences of individuals who inhabited the intersection of France and the Maghreb in a postcolonial world and who sought out an identity that was neither French nor North African, yet both. Likewise, Michel Laronde authored *Autour du roman beur: Immigration et identité* (1993) and *L'Écriture déentrée: la langue de l'Autre dans le roman contemporaine* (1996) during the same timeframe and emphasized the creation of new spaces for identity formation in a France that had been transformed by its immigrant population. However, as the titles of each of these texts suggests, these studies focused on a specific group of individuals who had a series of things in common: the dates during which their parents or grandparents arrived in France, their parents' place of birth, their own birth on French soil within a particular timeframe, their sense of exclusion from mainstream French culture, and their need to cultivate a new identity based on this set of factors.

Since the solidification of the subfield, Hargreaves and his Beur Studies colleagues, including Sylvie Durmelat, have begun problematizing the category designated by the term Beur due to its limited application. This turn in scholarly attention is visible in Hargreaves's more

⁹ See Wolfgang Welsch's chapter, "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today."

¹⁰ *Beur* is the term used to designate European/French individuals whose parents or grandparents immigrated from North Africa.

recent work, such as *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (2007) and Durmelat's *Fictions de l'intégration: du mot "beur" à la politique de la mémoire* (2008), as well as the volume she co-edited with Vinay Swamy, *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in Contemporary France* (2011). While the focus of these monographs remains predominantly North African in scope, their authors also engage topics that are pertinent across ethnicities: discourses of multi-culturalism, memory, and the French call for integration of its immigrant population. In these texts, scholars traditionally associated with Beur Studies examine evolving identities as well as the conflicts that have arisen in a struggle for balance between cultural maintenance and discourses of integration/assimilation in a post-9/11 France.

Family Time adds to these conversations by pushing the boundaries of inquiries surrounding the immigrant population in France; rather than thinking of these individuals as split between two worlds or as occupying a third, distinct space, I imagine that they are continually experiencing and re-experiencing the presence of each facet of themselves; this is not a study of Franco-Algerianness or of the experiences of the Beur population, but rather of the transnational/cultural identities of authors, protagonists and characters. *Family Time* is thus in keeping with the work of Jane Hiddleston, Subha Xavier, and Allison Connolly, who all published work in 2016 that poses insightful questions regarding the role of the transnational in Francophone Studies and vice versa.

Hiddleston traced the evolution of the field in her article "Francophone North African Literature" and pointed out that many believe that the future of Francophone North African Studies may lie in the "call for littérature-monde [which] may have emerged with an awareness of this sort of transcultural dynamism in mind" (92). Responding to the question of the role of littérature-monde, Xavier's first chapter in *Migrant Text: Making and Marketing a Global*

French Literature, “From *Weltliteratur* to the Migrant Text,” traces the history of the concept of World Literature and examines it alongside “the literary category known as Francophone which has, until now, encapsulated all literature from the French speaking world that does not qualify as ‘French’” (13) to develop her category of inquiry: migrant texts. For Xavier, *littérature-monde* is too broad a category to be of real use and the analysis of migrant texts offers distinct and valuable insights into the social and political questions of a contemporary world. By contrast, Allison Connolly’s *Spaces of Creation: Transculturality and Feminine Expression in Francophone Literature* makes no real intervention in the distinctions between postcolonial literature, *littérature-monde*, and Francophone literature. Instead, she cites a “theory of transculturality [that] asserts that contemporary cultures rely on entwinement and influence on a person-to-person level, surpassing identities tied to nation” (4). For the purposes of this study, I borrow Connolly’s phrasing as she defines transculturality, but prefer to think of cultures that are enmeshed rather than entwined; that is to say, they cannot be disentangled. It is my contention that even if we wanted to discern where one culture begins and another one ends, we would find ourselves unable to do so.

Family Time is also deeply indebted to previous scholarship that examines the roles of gender and sexuality in Francophone or Maghrebi literary studies. For example, Valérie Orlando’s *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (1999) takes up questions related to the role of the “feminine” in identity formation in today’s North Africa. Orlando begins by arguing that academic inquiries surrounding the postcolonial condition of the Maghreb necessarily devalue the region’s diversity and she advocates for “another, more productive term” in “our era of sociocultural multiplicity” (2). Subsequently, Orlando turns to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming-woman to advocate

for a “new feminism that operates on a politically active platform” (9). Of particular note in Orlando’s analysis is her assertion that this new feminism, with its spaces of agency, deconstructs the opposition scholar Gayatri Spivak has observed between the spheres of the public and the private (103) in her text, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Orlando 10). While Orlando’s analysis does call into question the oppositional nature of public and private, I hope to dissolve the distinction made between the two altogether; to do so, I privilege the family unit and its role in bridging the two concepts until public and private can be seen as two ends of a continuum rather than as a “grand dichotomy” (Kumar).

In a second example, Anne Donadey’s book, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing Between Worlds* (2001), calls for “a recasting of postcolonial literatures that foregrounds the specificity of the postcolonial by ‘pivot[ing] the center’ from male, Anglophone literature to fiction written in French by women in the postcolonial Algerian context” (xvii). Central to Donadey’s inquiry is her assertion that the relationship between postcolonial theory and feminism had not yet (at the time of her book’s publication) been adequately theorized. She argues that gender is central to an analysis of the postcolonial writings (specifically, those of Leïla Sebbar and Assia Djebar) due to the manner in which it explains much of the ambivalence present in postcolonial literature (xxix). Donadey’s writing informed much of chapter four of this dissertation, in which I examine a novel published by Leïla Sebbar, *Mon cher fils*. Additionally, in contrast to Orlando, Donadey’s book makes a pivotal shift toward thinking in terms of ambivalences. The agency that Orlando foregrounds can, at times, be difficult to pin down (see for example Nina Bouraoui’s *La voyageuse interdite* in chapter one). While *Family Time* relies on the notion of ambivalent conclusions, it also seeks to think about gender in manner that foregrounds its variability; in other words, this study includes questions regarding the

implications of seeking gender neutrality (chapter one), a study of the influence of masculinity in migration (chapter two), and an analysis of the manner in which gender influences relationships of estrangement (chapter four).

Scholars of Maghrebi Studies who have used gender and sexuality theories to queer constructs as they are seen in literature have also helped pave the way for *Family Time*. Namely, Jarrod Hayes's *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (2000) points out the manner in which discourses of nation have been used to exclude individuals who do not fit within the boundaries of sexual norms. Much like he does in *Queer Nations*, I argue that large portions of the immigrant population in France have been subjected to national non-belonging due to the non-conformity of their family structures. In this regard, Mehammed Amadeus Mack's *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture* (2017), which examines the influence of sexual politics on national identity, has also influenced my reading of the selection of texts included here. Throughout *Family Time*, I ask how notions of kinship and sexuality are imbedded in one another and how lack of sexual or familial conformity can be used to keep an immigrant population disenfranchised. My aim throughout the study is to read these novels differently to recover a space for the transnational/cultural families seen here.

Finally, I am indebted to recently published scholarly work that examines the queer experience alongside literary depictions of diaspora. Hayes's *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (2016) and his readings of Derridian *hauntology* were particularly influential in my second chapter, where I examine the roles of immigrant hauntings and inherited masculinities in an analysis of Azouz Begag's *Salam Ouessant*. Similarly, Denis M. Provencher's *Queer Maghrebi French: Language, Temporalities, Transfiliations* (2017) combines queer studies with questions regarding diaspora, citizenship and sexuality in France's

urban centers and banlieues.¹¹ The corpus Provencher has selected is limited to material that profiles queer-identifying men, but his concept of “transfiliation” is useful for an understanding of immigrant kinship among women and in more straight-identifying cases, as well (see page 6, above). His analysis of queer temporalities and understandings of kinship that move away from the (re)productive aims implicit in Fanon’s discourses of *progress*, in addition to Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), inform chapter four.

Chapter Summaries

My dissertation argues that the bonds and bondage that shapes relationships, and family more broadly, take hold of the characters, send them into periods of doubt and conflict, force them to reflect and outline new possibilities and, ultimately, alter their kinship structures. In each of my four chapters, the results are different; however, regardless of the nuances in each case, the authors and protagonists of these texts expand our understanding of what family can look like and advocate for a more inclusive definition of kinship.

In my first chapter, “Gender Dissonance: Maternal Bonds and Gendered Bondage in Mother-Daughter Relationships,” I examine Nina Bouraoui’s *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991). Bouraoui’s novel is a misfit within the rest of my corpus, in part because of its publication date in the early 1990s, and in part because its register is less accessible than the other books included in this study. However, it was one of the first (if not *the* first) Francophone novels to present a feminist vision of what I call the transnational/cultural family and to craft illustrations of kinship dynamics that exist as the result of bonds and bondage. Therefore, it is a necessary point of departure. In the novel, the young female protagonist (Fikria) struggles to discern her mother’s

¹¹ Provencher equates the balieues with the suburbs (13).

role in the gendered oppression she perceives around her. She looks to her mother in her transition from adolescence to adulthood as she deduces she will likely enter into a new, arranged matrimonial bond. Fikria seeks to cultivate a bond, or relationship of solidarity, with each of the female presences in her life, but learns that the possibility of those relationships is frustrated by what she represents for these women. She develops a relationship of bondage to her own body and imagines liberating herself from that relationship through self-mutilation. The end of the novel does not present Fikria's escape, but it opens up the possibility that she will be able to break the cycle she perceives around her in the next chapter of her life: marriage and motherhood.

Chapter two, "Divorce and Alternate Bonds of Paternity: The Bondage of Intersectional Masculinity and *Saudade*," is a study of Azouz Begag's semi-autobiographical text, *Salam Ouessant* (2012). This novel takes place over the course of a weeklong vacation as Azouz, the protagonist, goes to extremes in an attempt to get closer to his daughters; to achieve this goal, he will need to overcome the obstacles created by his divorce from his former wife and recalibrate his newly non-nuclear family. In this chapter, I argue that the protagonist's intersectional identity impedes him from finding relationships of intimacy with his daughters. Within his family, he occupies a marginalized parental role and his former wife is his daughters' primary parent. The model of masculinity he inherited from his male family members and the haunting of his transition from childhood to manhood has produced in him a state of *saudade*, or perpetual longing for an alternative. That *saudade* is the source of both his bonds and bondage and he seeks to transform it in order to open up a space for intimacy as he forges an alternate kind of paternity moving forward.

"Surrogacy: Temporary Familial Bonds and the Bondage of Origins," my third chapter,

takes up Fouad Laroui's roman d'apprentissage, *Une année chez les Français*, published in 2010. Here, the protagonist, Mehdi, leaves his home in rural Béni-Mallal, Morocco to pursue an education as a scholarship student at a French boarding lycée in Casablanca. In a humorous series of misunderstandings, Mehdi finds himself spending the weekends with a classmate, Denis, and his parents, the Bergers. The family takes Mehdi in and serves a surrogate or adopted family for him while he is away from home. As he grows accustomed to his new environment and it begins to feel more and more familiar to him, the extent to which he identifies with his hometown and biological family shrinks. Mehdi begins to confuse what is familiar with what is family and believes that he has been accepted and integrated in his new school and family. Despite the strength of the new bonds he forms, Mehdi learns that he will always be bound by his Arab-ness or Moroccan-ness and by the poverty that others associate with his rural origins. The experiential education he receives on race, class, ethnicity and religion and the compromise he must carve out for himself in order to feel at peace with his surroundings mark the site of his coming-of-age.

The last chapter, "Familial Estrangement: The Bondage of Separation and the Impossibility of Return," examines Leïla Sebbar's *Mon cher fils*. Sebbar's 2009 novel is made up of a series of vignettes, connected by a common protagonist, Alma. She relates to the characters around her because each of them, including Alma herself, is struggling with a relationship of estrangement from a family member. Here, I argue that previous theories of estrangement are insufficient to capture the relationships of estrangement presented by each of the vignettes Sebbar lays out in the novel. The second protagonist writes to his son, Tahar, in the eponymous vignette of this story and crafts a relationship with his son that is maintained *via* their estrangement rather than *despite* it. (He is unnamed, so Alma refers to him as l'homme, le vieil

homme, or le chibani. I refer to him here l'Homme.) Similarly, in another vignette, I argue that kinship estrangement is both a vehicle for bond-preservation and a source of familial bondage.

In my epilogue, “On *Becoming* and Becoming Family,” I examine the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Rosi Braidotti. Each of these scholars has developed a feminist theory of what it means to become woman. I connect each notion of becoming back to this dissertation and ask what the authors of the primary texts examined here can offer with regards to a theory of becoming family to imagine the future of this project.

Chapter One

Gender Dissonance: Maternal Bonds and Gendered Bondage in Mother-Daughter Relationships

The father is clearly dominant through the combination of his supremacy in terms of gender and generation. As for the mother and son, each compensates an inferiority in one hierarchical category – that of gender for the mother, that of generation for the son – by a superiority in the other category. This would mean that they were in a relationship of quasi-equality were it not for the fact that the hierarchy of gender takes priority over the hierarchy of generation, which gives the son a tangible advantage over his mother. Finally, in contrast to the father, the daughter combines the two disadvantages, and is thus doubly dominated because of her gender and generation.

-- Camille Lacoste-Dujardin, “Maghrebi Families in France”

Elizabeth V. Spellman has identified “somatophobia” – the fear of and discomfort with the body – as a pervasive discomfort among women and within feminism. Nothing entangles women more firmly in their bodies than pregnancy, birth, lactation, miscarriage, or the inability to conceive. Most areas of feminist analysis have been terribly careful to rule out an identification with biology. The thoroughness with which feminist theorizing, responding to the patriarchal identification of women with body and the need to keep the definition of feminine with the cultural, has done this must be motivated by a discomfort with the body.

-- Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*

This chapter is an exploration of maternity and, specifically, of the nuances of the figure of the transnational/cultural mother in relation to her (to use Lacoste-Dujardin’s language) “doubly dominated” daughter (64). Literary studies of maternity and mother-daughter relationships are prevalent and include titles such as Allison Connolly’s *Spaces of Creation: Transculturality and Feminine Expression in Francophone Literature* (2016), which is a detailed study of mother-daughter relationships across the postcolonial Francophone world. However, this chapter is different from previous studies in two ways. First, I limit my analysis to a single

text, *La voyeuse interdite* (1991), which provides a striking example of the need to analyze maternity and its relationship to kinship, more broadly, differently. In order to analyze it differently, I examine maternity as it changes once a daughter begins menstruating and when she gets married. Second, following Marianne Hirsch's call, I re-invite the body into my inquiry and ask how an analysis of the role of the body can impact and transform a study of mother-daughter relationships.

*La voyeuse interdite*¹² was published in 1991 and translated into English in 1995 by K. Melissa Marcus as *Forbidden Vision*. The novel tells the story of Fikria, an Algerian adolescent, who lives a solitary existence in her family's home in Algiers until the eve of her arranged marriage. She spends most of her time gazing out her bedroom window and acting as a gendered voyeur (or "voyeuse") of the bustling street below her. As she observes the interactions of her family members, reflects on her experiences growing up, imagines the future that awaits her, and dreams about alternative relationships and realities, her overall tone is critical. She looks to women around her for compassion and solidarity in her solitude but finds herself largely frustrated. Fikria also looks inside herself in hopes of cultivating agency while denouncing the social and familial forces that shape her environment but she remains largely resigned to her situation.

This novel marked Nina Bouraoui's debut as a successful author with a wide-ranging audience. Bouraoui is part of a larger trend in the 1990s and early 2000s, in which there was a surge of attention in France to cultural products by North African women (Pears 161). Initially, members of Bouraoui's readership (both Francophone and Anglophone) read her novel with outrage as they imagined the suffering that Bouraoui and other women like her must endure to

¹² From here on out, I refer to the novel as *La voyeuse*.

inspire a novel as dark as this one (Kemp 237). One does not need to look any further than the back cover of the English translation to read Rudy Wurlitzer's¹³ description of the book as "a story of tremendous energy and authenticity that burns through a terrible truth no one has quite told: the half-hallucinatory life of a culturally caged woman cut off from choice but for an imagination that surrenders only to its own violent freedom." The shock of Bouraoui's readership is not surprising given the emotional response solicited by the novel's cover, which features a young woman's eyes and evokes an association with confinement. In her analysis of the book's cover art, Pamela Pears has argued that "the cover photograph approximates the message of the text; however, for Bouraoui's novel, there remains the question of the regressive colonial project inherent in choosing a photograph that taps into the colonial history of voyeurism and fetishism" (169). In other words, French presses, whether consciously or not, have tapped into the legacy of exoticizing North African women to market and sell the book.

Based on the research I have done, scholars of the novel agree more or less unanimously that the novel is, in fact, strikingly violent with few opportunities for the protagonist to create agency or cultivate solidarity. (This point is elaborated later in the chapter.) However, the relevance of another word in Wurlitzer's description, "authenticity," has been questioned extensively since the novel's initial publication. Pears argues that complications arise when a Western market, such as the French one, seeks to present or represent Algerian women. Her contention is that the source of these problems lies in the paratext that surrounds North African women authors and their stories (161). Part of this paratext includes the assumption of authenticity. Scholars such as Anna Kemp and Jennifer Lee Johnson have examined the tendency of the Western public to assume that an author such as Bouraoui includes elements of

¹³ Wurlitzer is an American screenwriter and novelist.

autobiography in her writing. (This assumption is made far less often in readings of fictional works by Western authors.) Articles by these scholars have argued that *La voyageuse* requires a reading that de-emphasizes the possibility that Fikria serves as a *porte-parole* for her peers, and that “resist[s] attempts to make her [Fikria’s] subjectivity co-extensive with her perceived ‘otherness’” (Kemp 240). The tendency is for Bouraoui’s Western readership to make her protagonist, Fikria, *representative* of Algerian women or, at least, of Bouraoui. However, Bouraoui shares very few, if any, biographical details with her fictional protagonist: she was born in France in 1967 to an Algerian father and French mother and she spent her formative years in Algeria before emigrating back to France in 1980. She lived in Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates before settling in Paris, where she currently resides.

This study focuses on Fikria’s relationships with a set of maternal presences in her life — her biological mother, childhood nanny, and maternal aunt — to argue that *La voyageuse* is a source of inspiration for re-imagining relationships between mothers and daughters. To analyze these relationships, I turn to the role of the gendered bodies, or of bodies that are essentialized due to the gender that is grafted onto them; Fikria’s body informs her relationship to herself in addition to her relationships with others. The manner in which female characters in this text view their bodies results in a complex web of intimacies and violences. (At times, these women feel claustrophobia within their own skin.) The changes Fikria experiences in her relationships are due to changes in her body, and her hatred for certain feminine presences in her life can be traced back to a hatred of what their bodies represent for her. For example, when it comes time for Fikria to marry, the women in the text bond around the preparation of her body; Fikria, on the other hand, feels bound to her situation, and to the marriage that has been arranged for her, due to her rootedness in her body. In short, Bouraoui’s novel presents a case for the centrality of the

notion of corporeality in a study of maternity and in studies of transnational/cultural kinship, more broadly.

I argue that Fikria's relationships are best conceived of using my theory of slippage between bond and bondage; specifically, the extent to which she is able to bond with someone, and to which she feels bound in that same relationship, is a unique product of gendered interactions. In each examination of bond and bondage, I return to the body and the manner in which it informs the balance between the competing forces of gendered bonds and gender bondage. The result is that the relationships themselves can be imagined as a slippage from bond into bondage, and then from bondage back into bond.

Because this study focuses on mother-daughter bonds and bondage, it primarily examines Fikria's relationship with her biological mother. However, each section also examines her ties to a second maternal presence in her life. As Fikria contemplates her relationship with her birth mother, she imagines three distinct moments of rupture that have disturbed her ability to achieve the balance she seeks in her relationship with her: birth, menstruation, and marriage. I begin with an examination of the shift that occurs at birth, and then turn to address the question of when and where Fikria seeks solidarity with other women — most notably, her nanny-figure — after her birth. Subsequently, I focus on the rupture that occurs when Fikria starts her period. At the site of this rupture, Fikria develops a hatred towards her body and the female form due to her menstruation. Here, I use Fikria's interactions with another alternate mother, her aunt Khadija, to illustrate how Fikria grows to despise the female body. Lastly, I examine the rupture caused by marriage, and the extended metaphors Fikria relies on in order to present marriage as the final rupture, after which point she ceases (metaphorically) to exist.

In the face of each of these ruptures, Fikria reexamines the set of ties between herself and her mother as it shifts. Each rupture causes a radical change in the way she experiences maternity as kinship before the pair of women is able to renegotiate a new norm in which the relationship regains its pattern of sliding back and forth between gendered bond and gender bondage. Fikria's ability to find a source of connection with her mother waxes and wanes continually throughout the novel as she looks to her as a model, solicits empathy from her, and sees herself in her mother in spite of her desire not to. While Fikria seems unable to shake the forces around her to achieve her goals throughout the duration of the novel, its ending provides her with an opening to make changes. She leaves the home she grew up in and embarks into the unknown where, perhaps, she will be able to alter the deeply engrained pattern she had lived and design a new kind of maternity when she, herself, becomes a mother. The question of whether or not Fikria will succeed in breaking the cycle of slippage and tension between bonds and bondage she endured remains unanswered.

Birth and Solidarity: Cultivating New Relationships with New Family

This section examines the first moment of rupture Fikria imagines in her relationship with her mother. In what follows, I show how Fikria imagines the link between mothers and their infants and attributes it to the bodies of mother and child. As she reflects on the attachment between them, she both naturalizes and then denaturalizes it. She speculates as to the distinction between the birth of a female infant versus that of a male infant, and how the kinship ties between mother and infant, consisting of bonds and bondage, are informed by the gender of the baby. She denounces the cycle that produces the unique relationship of female infants to their mothers but admits that she is unlikely to escape it. In hopes of finding solidarity after this first

moment of rupture, Fikria turns to an alternate maternal presence in her life: the family's maid, Ourdhia. She establishes a radically different relationship to this maternal presence and her body due to Ourdhia's unique position in the household and in society more generally. At the end of this section, I show that once Ourdhia departs Fikria looks to her two sisters for solidarity, but finds her efforts frustrated.

The first moment of rupture in the relationship between Fikria and her mother occurs at birth. As Fikria muses about ties between mother and child, she posits that a similar rupture occurs with all mothers and their infants, but that the rupture is different for mothers and their daughters than it would be for mothers and their sons. The act of birth results in a renegotiation of the relationship between a mother and her baby and, through that renegotiation, a new balance between bond and bondage must be achieved. Fikria does not reflect much on pregnancy or on the relationship of mother and baby before birth; instead, her musings about mother-infant relationships, and mother-daughter relationships, specifically, pick up in the instants after birth occurs.

Fikria roots the connection between mother and fetus in their bodies, and then naturalizes that connection as she notes the role of the umbilical cord, which provides a literal, physical bridge between two bodies. Thus, for Fikria, the birth of a child has a sort of oxymoronic implication — a mother meets her child and looks him or her in the eyes for the first time, and yet, simultaneously, the cord that connects them is severed. Therefore, the first site of rupture in the relationship between a mother and child is an ironic one:

Où se meurt à présent notre attache naturelle ? Au fond d'une poubelle, dans le terrain vague d'une mémoire amnésique ou sous le creux de ton ventre coupable ?

Il ne m'en reste plus qu'un bouton de peau joufflu, me rappelant sans cesse notre première rencontre. Notre première séparation. (36)

Where is our natural attachment dying now? In the bottom of a trash can, in the open lot of an amnesiac memory or under the hollow of your guilty belly?

Nothing remains of it for me but a button of cubby skin, endlessly reminding me of our first meeting. Our first separation. (24)¹⁴

In this passage, Fikria highlights the duplicitous nature of the rupture that occurs at birth by pointing out that the first meeting between mother and child and their first separation occur at the same time. She accuses her mother of crafting an intentional amnesia to forget that she was ever bound or bonded to her daughter prior to her birth. Fikria inventories evidence of the rupture and reflects on the significance of the remaining mark on her body: her navel. She states that her bellybutton is the only proof she has that the connection between them ever existed. Fikria poses a series of unanswered questions about the once-natural attachment that she perceives her mother intentionally discarded, both literally and metaphorically. Finally, she concludes that her mother and her mother's belly are "guilty" of creating her current circumstances. In doing so, she foreshadows her disapproval of her mother, which continues throughout the novel and is described in more detail below.

Subsequently, Fikria complicates and denaturalizes the same moment of rupture by gendering it. While the umbilical cord is severed at the time of any child's birth, Fikria argues that the rupture she experienced was distinct and more traumatic because she was a female infant. Before examining the passage in which Fikria genders this moment of rupture, I would like to turn to a scene later in the book, where Fikria watches her mother's interactions with a healer who has promised to help her conceive a son:

Oui, elle voulait un garçon, mais plus encore. Encombrée par ses seins, ses hanches, son bassin, son ventre, ma mère désirait un pénis pour elle toute seule, un pénis qu'elle garderait toute sa vie, et là, enfin, on la respecterait, s'il avait pu jaillir de son bas-ventre lors des incantations, elle aurait été une femme comblée et, qui sait, peut-être adulée ?!

¹⁴ Translations come from K. Melissa Marcus's 1995 Station Hill edition.

Nous, filles, étions sa douleur, nos visages, nos corps lui rappelaient sa faiblesse, notre sexe, son sexe amputé, et si elle avait toujours cet air triste c'est parce qu'elle savait l'absurdité de notre existence à part qui nous éloignait un peu plus chaque jour des hommes et de nos semblables. (42-43)

Yes, she wanted a boy, but she wanted even more than that. Weighted down by her breasts, her thighs, her pelvis, her abdomen, my mother desired a penis all for herself, a penis that she would keep all her life, and with that, finally, she would be respected. If it had been able to burst forth from her lower abdomen at the time of the incantations, she would have been a fulfilled woman, and who knows, maybe even worshipped!

We girls were her pain, our faces, our bodies reminded her of her weakness, our sex recalled her own amputated sex, and if she always had this sad air it was because she knew of the absurdity of our existence apart, which distanced us from men and our counterparts a little more each day. (28-29)

As Fikria watches her mother undergo fertility rituals that will, supposedly, help her produce a male heir, Fikria deduces that her mother actually wants her own penis. Judith Butler has traced how regimes of power have imbedded gender norms into the categories male and female in her chapter "Doing Just to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality" in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Within the discourses sanctioned by these regimes of power, "male" and "female" represent two normal, natural poles, and anything that is not easily intelligible given those two poles (such as, for example, an intersex individual or person who identifies as transgender) is socially unrecognizable. These categories have also become medicalized and represented by chromosomes or sexual organs, such as a vagina or penis. Fikria's mother is not intersex, nor does she identify as transgender, but she desires the social access (or, to use Fikria's words, the "respect") granted to individuals who have a penis. Thus, she does not desire the organ itself, but rather the norms that accompany it, as they are defined by the regimes of power in her context.

Fikria's mother will never obtain "a penis all for herself," so she goes to the healer in search of the next best thing: a son. If she cannot gain access to male privilege through her own body, she can use her body to produce a second body in the form of offspring, which will

facilitate her access to elements of that privilege. Giving birth to a son is the only manner in which she can imagine partially redeeming her lack of penis. Which brings us back to the scene of Fikria's birth:

Chère maman, [...] j'aimerais tant me souvenir de tes baisers, de tes caresses, d'une accolade, de la chaleur de ton gros sein maltraité, ma gorge t'aspirait et tu devais hurler, j'aimerais me souvenir aussi de ton visage lorsque tu m'as vue pour la première fois. Ce n'est pas mes yeux que tu as regardés, non, tu as vite écarté mes jambes pour voir si un bout de chair pointait hors de mon corps à peine fait ! le bonheur ne tient pas à grand-chose ! trois secondes pour voir et pour savoir, un coup d'oeil jeté dans l'entre-cuisse, un doigt pour sentir et tu décidais par tes pleurs ou par tes cris de joie, de ma vie, de mon destin et de ma mort ! (34-35)

Dear Mamma, [...] I would so much like to remember your kisses, your caresses, an embrace, the warmth of your big mistreated breast, my throat sucked you in, and you must have screamed; I would like to remember, too, your face when you saw me for the first time. My eyes are not what you looked at, no, you quickly spread apart my legs to whether a piece of skin pointed out of my scarcely formed body! Happiness doesn't depend on much! Three seconds to see and to know, a glance between my thighs, a feeling finger, and you decided, by your tears or your cries of joy, my life, my destiny, and my death! (23)

While Fikria could not possibly remember being born, she relies on her knowledge of her mother, of her family dynamics more broadly, and of her mother's desire for a penis to imagine the moment her mother discovered she had given birth to a daughter. In her description of the events, she paints a vivid portrait of both her mother's realization that she had a second daughter and of her subsequent nursing of her female child. Before doing anything else, Fikria's mother checked to see if she had produced a penis that could grant her access to the respect she desired. When she realized she had not, Fikria claims with an ominous tone that it altered her destiny and her death. Her body is inscribed with meaning, due to her lack of penis, which informs her relationship with her mother from then on.

Fikria returns to her mother's body and claims she wishes she could remember what it was like to nurse from her mother's breast. The description begins with words such as "baisers,"

“caresses,” and “chaleur” to illustrate the memory Fikria would like to have of her infancy if that were possible. However, Fikria acknowledges that even if she could recall nursing, her memories would more likely be of the bondage her mother felt due to her own body’s lactation, and of the obligation her mother had to use her “mistreated breast” to nurse a child who did not grant her anything (and whom she, therefore, did not desire). She imagines her mother’s pain, stating that her mother was likely screaming in the process of feeding her child, and the scene grows distorted. Fikria’s infantile body does not provide her mother with an escape from her gendered bondage, and the first bond between mother and child elapses and is replaced by mother-daughter gender bondage.

As she describes her mother looking and feeling for a penis on her infant before meeting her gaze, it becomes clear that Fikria imagines the disappearance of a bond that was immediately replaced by something messier. Fikria implies that her mother would not have felt she was being “sucked in” by her child’s throat had she given birth to a male child, and her depiction of her imagined memories highlights the coexistence of bond and bondage; her mother could be, in theory, experiencing a maternal bond with her infant through the act of nursing. Fikria perceives that her mother’s rejection of the idea of breastfeeding is contingent upon Fikria’s position as a female child. Therefore, the potential for bond is overshadowed by gendered bondage that stems from the interaction of two gendered bodies. Had Fikria’s mother found something else between the legs of her baby, the balance between bond and bondage would not have been at stake and, instead, there would be a newly formed bond between mother and son.

For Fikria, the dissolution of the physical bond, which was once provided by the umbilical cord, is a *natural* change in the mother-child dynamic at the time of birth, despite the duplicitous nature of the rupture. By contrast, she feels the rupture that occurred between her

mother and herself because she was a girl represents an *unnatural* change. In this particular passage, she paints her mother as a villain who rejected and condemned her daughter. The mother-daughter bond and bondage become distinctly gendered and conflated with one another. Fikria's relationship with her mother from that moment forward is characterized by glimpses of the gender bond they share, which can be attributed in part to the similarities in their experiences, and by the gendered bondage that weighs on each of them as they interact with the world around them and with each other.

While Fikria will never re-experience the rupture that occurred when she was born, she points out its cyclical nature – it occurs and will continue to occur indefinitely for other women around her. Fikria's vision of what must have happened at the time of her birth is based, at least in part, on the birth of her younger sister, Leyla. Though Bouraoui does not state their age difference explicitly, one can deduce that Fikria is at least a decade older than Leyla and, thus, she recalls the arrival of her younger sister in detail. Leyla was dismissed and subjected to abuse just moments after she was born, and her mother's reaction to her body nearly resulted in infanticide (47-48). Fikria describes her sister's intelligent eyes (much like the way she referenced her own eyes while imagining the scene of her birth) to remind the reader of her sister's humanity and to bestow judgment on her mother for not recognizing it.

The process of witnessing Leyla's birth becomes a source of bondage for Fikria. She feels compelled by and bonded to the newborn who is neglected by her parents, but she is distressed by the events that unfolded; after all, witnessing Leyla's birth conjures up imagery of what her own birth must have been like. While the bondage depicted here remains rooted in the bodies of Leyla and her mother, the scene contains far fewer references to body parts. Leyla, unlike Fikria, was formally deprived of human touch. The absence of body parts becomes a

stand-in for the neglect Leyla suffered as an infant, and the glass of milk “renversait sur sa bouche goulue,” (48) or ‘spilled on her gluttonous mouth’ (33) replaces the neglectful breast that should have been feeding her. The rupture of bond between mother and baby is even more abrupt for Leyla than it was for Fikria, and the implication is that the bondage that will ensnare Leyla in the future will also be greater.

The manner in which the rupture of birth repeats itself and creates an unbreakable cycle leads Fikria to conceive of her circumstances as a sort of bodily predestination — just as she was unable to avoid the rupture that occurred in her bond with her mother at the time of her birth, she will not be able to avoid participating in other pieces of the same cycle: “La stérilité de mon existence a germé dans le ventre de ma mère, celle de mes petites germera dans le mien. Mes pauvres filles, comme je vous plains, moi, la fautive qui vous enfanterai !” (17) ‘The sterility of my existence germinated in the belly of my mother, and that of my little girls will germinate in mine. My poor daughters, how I pity you, I the faulted one will give birth to you!’ (10). Fikria denounces her future, maternal self, saying that she is the one to blame for the birth of her hypothetical daughters, just as her mother is to blame for hers. Fikria pities her daughters before they enter the world for the suffering they will experience, which she imagines will likely resemble her own suffering. The sorrow she feels and the manner in which she has compassion for her hypothetical daughters highlights the potential for a bond of shared experience between Fikria and her future daughters. However, that potential bond dissolves with her observations of her mother’s participation in the cycle. In blaming herself, Fikria highlights the lack of agency a woman (and, thus, her own mother) has over her own reproduction and over the gender of her child, thereby partially redeeming her mother from the blame she casts on her. Because all

women are “fautives,” or ‘faulted’ for the lives of their daughters, the bondage of their experience becomes visible and they become, ironically, blameless.

Fikria denounces the cycle for its violence, but she cannot imagine that she will be able to avoid perpetuating it when she becomes a mother herself. This is, perhaps, unsurprising considering the evidence scholars such as Leila Ahmed have used to show that “the subordination of women in the ancient Middle East appears to have become institutionalized with the rise of urban societies and with the rise of the archaic state in particular,” which is to say, it became institutionalized centuries, if not millennia, ago (11). The notion, then, that women hold an inferior position in society is so deeply engrained, that Fikria sees it as part of a cycle that perpetuates itself in spite of other changes that have occurred since its conception.

The cycle Fikria observes also undermines the possibility that a mother-daughter bond and/or bondage could *progress* in a particular direction or evolve along some linear path. Carl Jung made a similar argument in his essay “The Psychological Aspects of the Kore”:

We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling give rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*: a woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter. (188)

The process Jung describes results in a “particular uncertainty as regards *time*,” but Fikria’s observations add to this argument; Jung’s analysis does not foreclose the possibility of change in the way that Fikria’s perception of the mother-daughter cycle does. For Jung, the intermingling between mother and daughter destabilizes the possibility of evolution but, according to Fikria’s logic, the possibility of change has disappeared altogether. In Fikria’s cycle, the same moment of rupture produced by birth will fold back on itself, repeat itself, and perpetuate itself, indefinitely; the agency of any specific woman (in this case Fikria, or her mother) to make decisions about children dissipates and, instead, Fikria is left with the bodily predestination she imagines.

After birth and the first rupture in the relationship between bond and bondage, Fikria searched for points of solidarity to help her navigate her adolescence. Her childhood relationship with her mother was characterized by bondage that was constantly shifting and, thus, difficult for her to understand. Fikria managed the slippage from bond to bondage by turning to alternative female or feminine presences in her life that were external to her mother. The most significant of those presences include her nanny-figure and sisters, but none of the alternative maternal bonds she creates with them fully satisfies her need for solidarity.

Fikria was partially successful in her attempt to find solidarity during the period of her life when her family employed a maid, Ourdhia, who also served as a nanny-figure and maternal presence for the family's girls. Ourdhia was a nomad from the Sahara who arrived at the family's home abruptly, knocked on the door one day and asked for work, and then departed just as mysteriously. Fikria's descriptions of Ourdhia are built largely on the way she differed sharply from her birth mother, and Fikria's relationship with Ourdhia escapes the bondage that defines her relationship with her mother. Fikria states openly that she and her sisters found a source of solidarity and maternal bond that was missing from their relationship with their mother, in Ourdhia: "Toujours là pour prodiguer quelques fractions de tendresse, je tétais son sein vide pendant l'orage, enfouissais ma tête dans son ventre creux ; à travers elle je fuyais la nuit maudite, je captais l'étrange chaleur d'un long corps" (50), 'She was always there to offer some small amounts of tenderness, and I sucked on her empty breast during the storm, buried my head in her hollow stomach; through her I escaped the cursed night, I captured the strange warmth of a long body' (35). Fikria's bond with Ourdhia in the literary present is facilitated by her memory of her. However, like other bonds and sites of bondage in the text, the bond Fikria has with Ourdhia is rooted in the physical body and comfort it provided. Fikria admits that she preferred

the bond she shared with Ourdhia to anything she felt toward her mother, and this maternal bond with a surrogate mother-figure highlights the inadequacy of Fikria's connection to her mother.

Because Ourdhia's body was a source of comfort for Fikria in her childhood, in the literary present she imbeds a mystical value into Fikria's body. For example, Fikria recalls that Ourdhia was "discreet" (36) and that, thanks to her tenderness, Ourdhia was the only one who could calm Leyla during her fits (50). The vocabulary Fikria uses to describe Ourdhia depicts her as ultra-feminine and complies with many of the stereotypes regarding idyllic feminine traits. Ourdhia's absence in the literary present allows Fikria to maintain an idealized image of her and of the solidarity she felt in her presence.

Unfortunately, much of Fikria's perception of Ourdhia's perfection is undone when she recalls that Ourdhia was constantly harassed in the streets (57) and that her father raped her (73). Ourdhia was at war with the world around her, which sought to violently undo the perfection Fikria felt she embodied (73). Thus, Ourdhia's mystical body was also a source of bondage for her in a manner that is distinct from the bondage of other female characters in the novel. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida asks the question of the woman-foreigner (113) through a reading of the story of Antigone. He explains that Antigone's despair is twofold: her father has died, and she can no longer hope that one day he will *see* her fully (115). Ourdhia provides a possible answer to the query of the foreign woman. Fikria's father raped her because he simultaneously saw her and was not able to see her. Fikria might envy Ourdhia (55-56) and desire the bond she felt with Ourdhia's maternal body (35), but for the rest of the world, Ourdhia's body was more complex. For example, Fikria's father saw Ourdhia as a desirable body, but he also chose not to see her. He accomplished this not-seeing of her by categorizing her as a less-than-woman foreigner, who had no agency and was rape-able. Fikria mentions Ourdhia's rape in the midst of a paranoid,

almost hysterical stream-of-consciousness (73). Thanks to their bond, Ourdhia's rape affects Fikria personally. When she remembers the rape, the violence of that memory causes her to imagine a knife cutting her own flesh.

As Fikria thinks back to Ourdhia and contemplates her role in the family and in society, she recognizes that her bondage was distinct from that of the other women in the house and it transcended her father's rape of her. Ourdhia's position lies at a complex intersection of woman, not-woman, and stranger/foreigner as conceptualized by Benveniste, and the Hegelian Other. For instance, Ourdhia is able to leave the family's home and circulate in public: "Optimiste, la nomade emportait un couffin et un filet à provisions ! je l'enviais, marcheuse du désert et maintenant de la cité, elle seule avait le droit de quitter la prison" (56), 'Optimistic, the nomad carried a basket and a net bag for her things. I envied her, desert walker now citydweller, she alone had the right to leave the prison' (39). The right, or obligation (depending on how one chooses to see it), to leave the "prison" and move about in public spaces stems from Ourdhia's social position as a foreign or stranger-woman.

Ourdhia's bondage is related to her constant status as an Other in her environment. Derrida considers the aporia of absolute hospitality, and he cites the previous scholarship of Émile Benveniste regarding the "pact" of hospitality that defines a foreigner as an individual who has a right but also an obligation (23). Bouraoui does not give the reader any insight into Ourdhia's experiences before coming to live with Fikria and her family, but within the confines of Fikria's world, Ourdhia escapes being defined as "woman" because her foreignness and her blackness make her less-than-woman (55-56). As a foreigner, Ourdhia not only circulates in public, but does so without covering herself in the way that is customary among most women of

Algiers. Fikria's mother binds Ourdhia to her Otherness (Hegel 98-99), through the bondage of her foreign body, and robs her of her rights that are due her (Derrida 23).

Fikria views Ourdhia's unique, oppressive bondage as liberating and anti-oppressive. The bond Fikria shares with Ourdhia and with the memory of her leads her to envy her and admire the way she defied the limits her bondage sought to impose on her (56-57). Fikria does not fully understand the space which Ourdhia occupied in their home and in the city of Algiers, but she senses its uniqueness, and her image of this space becomes ideal in her imagination. The perfect bond she has with the memory of Ourdhia, her maternal body, and her mysterious aura, is facilitated by the abruptness with which Ourdhia left (58). Though she did not stay in Fikria's life as a source of solidarity through the next two ruptures Fikria would face, Ourdhia did help Fikria find a new balance of bond and bondage in her adolescence. In the literary present, Fikria relies on the memory of Ourdhia as a source of strength and to wish she could substitute her own place as a woman in the household for Ourdhia's liberating bondage of less-than-woman.

The argument Bouraoui makes with Ourdhia's departure from Fikria's family parallels Derrida's reflection on nomads as an example of the "absolute foreigner" (87-89). The absolute foreigner, and therefore Ourdhia, carries an abstract homeland with him or herself, and possesses a freedom to return to the nomadic lifestyle. Bouraoui presents Ourdhia's homeland as an abstraction of the Sahara; as a nomad, Ourdhia has no responsibilities to anyone other than herself. This lack of responsibility and belonging produces her unique bondage, which is also her unique freedom. Fikria admires Ourdhia's body, mystical aura, and her nomadic lifestyle, which keeps her both bound and free.

At other points in the text, Fikria turns to her sisters as possible sources of solidarity. In theory, Zohr and Leyla should provide natural spaces for bonding given their similar upbringing

and predicaments of bond and bondage with their shared mother. However, both of Fikria's sisters are insufficient sources of female solidarity for different reasons. Zohr, Fikria's older sister, seeks self-preservation in the face of the bondage her parents could subject her to and has, therefore, reduced herself to a sickly, plant-like presence in the home (130). At times, she sabotages Fikria and uses her as a tool for her own objectives (28-29). Fikria cites Zohr's understanding of "la souffrance d'être née femme dans cette maison" (28) or 'the suffering of being born a woman in this house' as the reason the two women should be able relate to one another. The communication between the two sisters is mostly non-verbal and, through unspoken signals, Zohr is able to identify Fikria's emotional state better than anyone else. Thus, Fikria mourns their inability to develop a deeper connection.

Fikria recognizes that in spite of their mutual understanding, their family environment has pushed each of them, and especially Zohr, to look out only for themselves. As Fikria's older sister, Zohr has lived many of Fikria's experiences and can read her body language. When they do share brief moments of connection, those moments quickly dissolve and Fikria grows suspicious of her sister. Rather than feeling compelled to join Fikria in solidarity or to coach her through her challenges, the bondage the sisters live on a regular basis has pushed Zohr to "illicit misuse" of her sister's emotional experiences (*Forbidden* 19). Zohr could be Fikria's companion in suffering but, instead, Fikria sees her as an unfortunate soul who seeks to feed off of her [Fikria's] frustrations and tears (*La voyageuse* 28-29). The possibility of a bond facilitated by solidarity is frustrated by Zohr's desire for self-preservation.

Leyla, on the other hand, is depicted as a monstrous, animal-like sibling with no understanding of the world she lives in: "Toujours à quatre pattes en train de fouiner dans les poubelles comme un petit animal à la recherche d'os et de restes de nourriture [...], enfant

sauvage souvent cachée sous les escaliers, derrière la porte de la cuisine ou dans son lit, Leyla est ma seconde sœur” (47), ‘Always down on four paws, nosing in the garbage cans like a little animal searching for bones and food scraps [...], wild child often hidden under the stairs, behind the kitchen door, or in her bed, Leyla is my second sister’ (33). Fikria feels both bonded with and bound to Leyla, who does not receive anyone else’s affection. Fikria knows that Leyla will share many of her life experiences and, thus, feels an obligation towards her.

Fikria is the main source of the bond between herself and Leyla, and she displays a sisterly solidarity toward her, but Leyla is unable to reciprocate the support that Fikria provides:

Je ne joue jamais avec ma petite sœur, nous nous caressons de temps en temps, elle se blottit contre moi et simule un nouveau sommeil, nos cœurs se répondent par des battements saccadés et je laisse le dialogue des chairs faire son travail. Que pourrais-je lui dire ? Que pourrait-elle savoir de plus ? Oui, nous tuons le temps. Nous attendons un autre ennui dans une autre maison avec d’autres fenêtres pour regarder les arbres, la rue, les hommes, le monde. A part. Je ne dis rien. (49)

I never play with my little sister, sometimes we caress each other, she nuzzles up against me and pretends to be asleep again, our hearts answer each other with irregular beats, and I let the dialogue of our flesh do its work. What could I say to her? What more could she know? Yes, we’re killing time. We await further boredom in another house with yet other windows for looking out at the trees, the street, the men, the world. Separately. (34)

Fikria uses the pronoun “nous” to highlight her unity with her sister; by contrast, in other passages Fikria marks the first-person plural with the pronoun “on.” The bond Fikria shares with her sister is visible in the image of their conversing heartbeats and in the physical affection they share with one another. However, Fikria cannot talk with her sister about any issue of substance due to their age difference and to the fact that Leyla has yet to begin speaking. Additionally, Fikria knows that once her arranged marriage has occurred, she and Leyla will live in separate homes. Because she will not be able to talk to Leyla about her adolescence, Fikria feels mostly helpless in her bond with her sister. She passively succumbs to the bondage and that prevents her from nourishing a potentially deeper gender bond with her younger sister.

Menstruation: Blood and Hatred of the Female Body

For Fikria, the second moment of rupture in a mother-daughter relationship occurs when the daughter reaches puberty. In this section, I examine the stakes of menstruation for Fikria both in the structures that make up her kinship and in her relationship to the world outside her home. I show how the arrival of her period only causes Fikria to resent her body more than she already did and how she both naturalizes and de-naturalizes the physical change, as with the rupture of birth before. Fikria looks to Zohr as a potential source of inspiration for avoiding the bondage of this second rupture and blames their mother for their suffering. I argue that menstruation opens the possibility of a new gender bond between Fikria and her mother, but that it is also the reason Fikria sees her future in the bodies of other women, forming a new source of bondage.

Fikria identifies menstruation as a pivotal moment in her adolescence and recalls that it was followed by a series of changes, including the extent to which she was permitted to interact with the world outside of her home. She experienced a dramatic change in her ability to circulate in public and was relegated to living behind the walls and windows of her home. Although she never states that this transition occurred due to her mother's rules, she critiques her mother for not easing the burden of the transition. Fikria learned of the nuances of the rupture in her mother's modified mannerisms: her mother gripped her hand more tightly when they were walking together in the streets, and grew more skeptical, or suspicious, of the male gazes she felt cast upon her daughter (21). The bondage of parent-daughter relationships shifts irreversibly at puberty, because of the meaning those parents ascribe to the arrival of a daughter's menstrual blood. In *La voyageuse*, menses symbolize a state of maturation for Fikria's parents, who then use her body to preclude her from certain freedoms.

The changes Fikria noticed were not limited to her role in public; her parents also mobilized her menstrual blood to alter their familial environment. The most notable of these modifications involved the schism that grew between her and men and, especially, between her and her father. She recalls trying to hide the change that had taken place from her father, but he discovered her and reacted with disgust:

Je me dirigeais vers mon cabinet de toilette pour tenter d'effacer les premières marques de la souillure tant redoutée mais il était trop tard. Mon père surgit dans ma chambre. Furieux, il se tenait la tête. Nue, les jambes entravées par le drap du crime, je tombais à ses pieds et plaidais mon irresponsabilité ; en ouvrant mes veines, la nature s'était dressée contre moi, mon cœur battait désormais dans mon bas-ventre, ses artères semblables à des gargouilles un jour de pluie dépassaient de ma fleur suppurante et déversaient sur mes cuisses toute leur haine et toute leur violence.

Il me roua de coups et dit :

« Fille, foutre, femme, fornication, faiblesse, flétrissures, commencent par la même lettre. »

Ce furent ses derniers mots (32-33).

I led myself toward my bathroom to try to erase the first marks of the dreaded impurity, but it was too late. My father appeared suddenly in my room. In fury, he clutched his head between his hands. Naked, my legs hindered by the sheet of crime, I fell to his feet and pleaded that I was not responsible; by opening my veins nature had risen up against me; henceforth my heart beat in my lower abdomen, its arteries like gargoyles on a rainy day went beyond my suppurating flower and poured onto my thighs all of their hate and violence.

He beat the daylight out of me and said: "Female, fuck, femininity, fornication, feebleness, flaws, start with the same letter." These were his last words. (22)

Fikria's father shouts a string of profanities at her, reducing her to the bodily function that he abhors. He links his anger and revulsion to both the female form, in general, and her body, more specifically. Consequently, he further imbeds the notion that a woman's bondage is tied to her body into Fikria's conscience. After his outburst, Fikria's father no longer speaks to her, looks at her, or even acknowledges her when she is in the room. Instead, Fikria's isolation and new bondage, due to the second moment of rupture, will transform into a maternally-enforced form of

bondage; now that she has hit puberty, she has transformed into a responsibility that is solely within her mother's domain.

The loaded language Fikria deploys to describe the events and her feelings toward them can be extended to describe her internalized view of her gender and body more broadly. Fikria's reaction to her menstrual blood, the second rupture, becomes an anecdotal representation of her revulsion towards her body, of the trauma of her first menstrual cycle, and of the death to which her body condemns her. She naturalizes her body's cycle (similarly to her naturalization of the rupture that accompanies birth), by describing the manner in which "nature had risen up against me [her]." However, she simultaneously correlates the event with her father to social forces by linking it to "hate and violence." She reveals that she has internalized the same disgust that her father expresses, as she uses words like "souillure," or 'impurity,' to describe her menstrual blood and "crime" to refer to the act of menstruation, as if it were an action that a woman could take deliberately. According to her, if she been able to deny the natural change that her body had undergone, she could also have avoided a deepening of her gender bondage.

Rather than being angry at her father, her mother, or at some abstract, outside force, Fikria projects the anger she feels in response to her situation onto her own flesh, claiming that her body has betrayed her:

Manie de famille, je commence à dissimuler mes seins en me tenant légèrement courbée, les côtes rentrées et les bras en bouclier. Le corps est le pire des traîtres, sans demander l'avis de l'intéressé, il livre bêtement à des yeux étrangers des indices irréfutables : âge, sexe, féconde pas féconde ? (60-61)

Following the family mania, I'm starting to hide my breasts by holding myself in a slightly bent position, my ribs pulled in and my arms shielding me. The body is the worst of traitors, without asking the opinion of the interested party, it stupidly delivers undeniable signs to foreign eyes: age, sex, fertile or not fertile? (42)

Fikria recognizes that she cannot control her physical development, but she reprimands her body for being outside of her control. Here, her body betrays things about her she wishes she could keep secret, such as her age, her gender, and her fertility.¹⁵ She feels stuck within it and her relationship to her body produces the sense that she suffers from a claustrophobia of the body. Because she is encased within her body, it is both literally a source of bondage she cannot escape, and a metaphor for the inescapability of other forms of bondage. She attempts to overcome it by changing her posture to hide her growing breasts, but it continues to betray certain facts about her in its outward appearance.

In other passages, Fikria states that the femininity of her body is a congenital illness (*Forbidden* 60) or a hereditary abnormality (*Forbidden* 78). Here again, her mother and the other women in her family are to blame for passing down the gene that produces a woman's body. They are also culpable for producing the "family mania" she cites at the beginning of the passage, which could refer to the general negative regard for the female form or the impulse to carve it into something less overtly feminine. For Fikria, this mania takes the form of punishing the flesh by pinching it repeatedly (*Forbidden* 47), but the main sufferer who hides her body from the world is Fikria's sister: Zohr. Like Fikria, Zohr sees that her relationship of bondage with her parents is rooted in her body. She knows that her parents will develop plans for her body and arrange her marriage if she does not actively impede the process.

However, unlike Fikria, Zohr is able to discipline her body enough to evade the second moment of rupture and its corresponding bondage; she has been successful in her project to keep her body from giving her and her femininity away. The world sees Zohr's body as disfigured, sickly, and ineligible for marriage (Fikria describes her as a vegetable on several occasions), but

¹⁵ The false conflation of menstruation with fertility is Bouraoui's or Fikria's. For the purposes of this study, I do not distinguish and, instead, I duplicate the language used by the author and narrator.

it remains unclear how much of that distorted appearance is a product of Zohr's intentional mutilation of her own flesh. By contrast, what is apparent is that Zohr wants to hide the markers that give away her femininity, so she binds her chest with bandages and inflicts micro-mutilations on herself:

Zohr est en guerre contre sa nature, nature féminine, pourriture pour notre père, honte pour notre fautive de mère, c'est elle la traîtresse qui pousse Zohr toujours plus loin dans ses sacrifices, ses artifices et ses dissimulations grotesques. Et la diaphane n'oublie jamais en notre présence de pincer sa bouche légèrement charnue une fois relâchée, pour cacher, mordre au sang, détruire enfin ce bout de chair route et strié, signe de vie et de fécondité ! (27-28)

Zohr is engaged in a battle against her nature, her feminine nature, a rotting thing for our father, shame for our offending mother; it is she, the traitor, who pushes Zohr further in her sacrifices, her artifices and her grotesque cover-ups. And in our presence, the fake never forgets to pinch her slightly fleshy mouth, once it has relaxed, to hide it, to bite it until it bleeds, to finally destroy this piece of red scratched flesh, sign of life and fecundity! (18)

Fikria uses the word "guerre" or 'battle' to describe Zohr's duplicitous process; for Zohr, the violence is liberating, or a form of agency. While Fikria's body sheds menstrual blood that alerts her family of her post-pubescent state, Zohr's body bleeds because she pushes it away from the form it would naturally take. Zohr is fighting a force much greater than herself (nature and its influence on her body), so she can never be fully victorious over her body and, instead, she must find small winning moments as she manages and disciplines it.

Although Zohr is just as bound to her body as her sister, she does a better job of using it to her own end; she escapes the hypothetical bondage that her mother would orchestrate for her if given the opportunity. The manner in which Zohr and Fikria both actively work to evade their mother and her projects for them produces a sort of competition between them and affects their relationship. In the last line of the passage above, Zohr's micro-mutilation is directed at her lips in order to destroy the possibility that they might make her attractive or healthy-looking. In this

line, Fikria reveals the principle reason for Zohr's abuse of her body — she wants to rid her body of any sign that it might be capable of bearing children. Fikria explains that Zohr's lips reveal that her body is alive, a symbol of her “fécondité” or ‘fecundity.’ Because Zohr's sickliness is the result of her ability to control her body and direct its shape, and therefore it allows her to dodge a portion of her gender bondage. In this way, the mother comes between the sisters and Fikria feels jealous of Zohr and her sickliness.

Fikria blames their mother directly for the violence Zohr inflicts on her flesh and for their disintegrated relationship. She claims that it is their mother's fault that they were born female and that Zohr is a “pourriture” or ‘a rotting thing’ that has been pushed to extremes by their mother. Their mother is “la traîtresse” or ‘the [feminine] traitor’ because she gave birth to her daughters and then turned her back on them; she left them to fend for themselves, destroyed any possibility that they might find solidarity with one another in their shared suffering, and she now enforces the mechanisms that keep them slaves to their gender bondage. Fikria recalls having invented moments of illness, in an attempt to approximate Zohr's illness and to attract compassion from their mother, but their mother refused to care for her or to look past their bondage to form a bond with her daughter (64). While Zohr's bondage may be the product of patriarchal mechanisms at work, their mother is ultimately the one who denied them a mother-daughter bond through the process, and she is the one who surveils their gendered bondage.

Ironically, in spite of the violence Fikria was subjected to by her father when she began her period, her menstruation also opens up the possibility of a violent gender bond with her mother. Fikria's blood is socially interpreted as her body's announcement that she is ready to bear children, which, by extension, means she is now eligible to have her marriage arranged. Fikria's body is the only one of the bodies belonging to the three sisters which their mother can

use to prop herself up socially. To use Fikria's words, her future wedding and marriage will provide her mother with a site upon which to exact her revenge: "C'est à travers moi, seule féconde de la maison, qu'elle se venge de sa naissance, de nos existences et de son sexe, dans le cœur de ses fourneaux, elle a dissimulé la mixture de sa prochaine embuscade, stupide maman" (65), 'It is through me, the only fertile one in the house, that she avenges her birth, our existence and her sex; in the caldron of her being she has concealed the mixture for her next ambush, stupid mother' (46). Fikria's mother will be able to use Fikria's body in order to fulfill part of her own obligations, which means that she regards Fikria differently and could capitalize on the change to facilitate a change in their bond.

As we have already seen, Fikria's mother's primary goal was to produce a son, so that she could create access to a particular set of social norms. However, she was not able to do fulfill this reproductive duty, which might derive from a set of self-imposed pressures. Therefore, she now assumes a different set of gendered, familial responsibilities: find a suitable husband for her daughter and obtain a son-in-law. Through her daughter's marriage, Fikria's mother will be able to partially rectify the failures of "her birth, [the daughter's] existence and her sex." Fikria detects a change in her mother's attitude toward her and knows that the change can be attributed to the impending marriage, or "ambush," she is arranging for Fikria. She calls her mother "stupid" because, despite her mother's attempts to be discrete, Fikria sees through her plan. The partial redemption that Fikria's "fertility" and, by extension, marriage represent for her mother takes the edge off of her mother's interactions with her. Her mother develops a one-sided bond with this new, marriage-eligible version of Fikria. Fikria, knowing that she is being used, does not reciprocate the bond or the benefits it brings. This one-sided bond becomes more visible and prominent as her wedding day approaches and as the inevitability of marriage solidifies.

After she reaches puberty, Fikria sees more of herself in the bodies of older women, such as her mother, and loathes the female form, what it says about her own body, and about her future. In the interstitial space between the arrival of Fikria's menses and her marriage, she begins to understand her mother a bit better and her mother's motivations grow clearer. She and her mother develop an ambiguous relationship that is characterized by its slippage between gender bonds of mutual understanding and the gendered bondage that accompanies those bonds. Fikria allows her distaste for her mother's situation to affect her own self-image, which causes her growing understanding of (and even empathy for) her mother to be mirrored by resentment. For example, as Fikria observes her mother and her mother's subservience to her father, her mother's lack of agency informs the bondage that Fikria feels. As Fikria watches her mother's life and the pain she withstands in the day-to-day, she sees her future and the pain it will bring her. She is bitter toward her mother for not presenting her with a better model for dealing with the future that awaits her.

Fikria's mother unintentionally reinforces Fikria's idea that her bondage is rooted in her body in one particular scene, where Fikria's mother is not able to control her husband's access to her body. Fikria watches as her father rapes her mother and refers to her mother as her father's "victim." She is repulsed by both her father's violence toward her mother and her mother's passive role in the rape (*La voyageuse* 36-38). Fikria's language reduces the rape to something so physical and devoid of humanity, it becomes bestial. She describes her father's "little calves", his "bellowing like a trapped animal" and his "unsatisfied desires" (*Forbidden* 24-25) to suggest that he and the physical pleasure he seeks are pathetic. Her mother, on the other hand, has "not very agile thighs" and becomes either a wolf, a sea urchin, or an inanimate rowboat at various points

in the scene. Fikria's discomfort with the bondage imposed by the body congeals as her mother accrues bruises throughout the rape and her father hurls insults after he climaxes.

As Fikria internalizes that her mother's bondage is due to her body, she re-projects back out on to her own body, blaming it for her current state of isolation in the home and for the miseries she imagines in her future. The hatred she feels toward her body grows in each passing scene. Initially, her condescension of her body and her face is little more than a series of observations, in which she describes herself as having aged prematurely due to sadness (*La voyageuse* 16) and as not feeling pretty (*La voyageuse* 60). Subsequently, she disciplines her body and claims that her father is the source of the violence she inflicts upon herself:

Je me terre dans un des quatre coins de ma cellule et m'inflige des pinçons
« tourbillonnaires » : pressions du pouce et de l'index sur un bout de chair innocent dont
la seule faute est la tendresse. Mon père a été le déclencheur de ma violence. Le
responsable que j'accuse ! (66)

I burrow into one of the four corners of my cell and inflict on myself “swirling” pinch marks, thumb and index finger pressures on a piece of innocent flesh whose only fault is tenderness. My father has been the trigger of my violence, the responsible party whom I hereby accuse. (47)

Her body is oxymoronic in that it is both blameless because its only fault is “tenderness,” and central to all of her blame, because she inscribes the bondage she feels onto her flesh. As she sits pinching herself, she thinks of her father and of the violence of the rape scene. His abuse of her mother represents the rape she will suffer in her future and, thus, she designates him the primary “responsible party” in the bondage she feels.

Initially, Fikria wonders if one way to avoid the bondage of her body might be to look to a subversive model in her family: Zohr. She has witnessed her sister push her body into a liminal space, where it is no longer “intelligible” as feminine or female (Butler 57). Zohr has traded the gendered bondage the world around would seek to impose upon her for a physical bondage of

her own design, comprised of illness and discomfort. The result is that she occupies a very different space from Fikria's within the family, and she contains fewer opportunities for the production of additional kin. As her wedding draws nearer, Fikria dreams of escaping her gendered bondage by making her body genderless. At the time of the dream, she has just spent a week confined to her room by herself. She imagines a painful solution in which she mutilates her body in resistance:

La tige de fer remonta loin le cours de l'Oued asséché, broussailles, cailloux, flaques, rien ne put l'entraver dans sa course contre le noir ! gondolée à souhait, elle arrivait à sauter les haies, les trous, les dentelles et les pics matelassés ; quand une douleur aiguë m'ébranla : la tête chercheuse était enfin arrivée. Elle piqua net, se recula pour prendre de l'élan et, les yeux bandés mais l'esprit clair, elle me seringua une douleur si grande que je manquai arracher ma langue. En dépit d'un flot carmin qui vint apaiser la brûlure inhumaine, elle continua plus haut et, sous la peau de mon bas-ventre, je la vis faire la danse du serpent. Comme un enfant découvrant un nouveau jouet, le petit cintre s'amusa à l'intérieure de moi, piquant au vif les plus gros organes, taquinant les plus petits, contournant les plus longs, puis, brûlé par les rouages de la mécanique en marche, il sortit incandescent de la blessure pleine de sang qui ne cessait de couler sur mon drap. (109)

The iron rod went far up the course of the dried Oued¹⁶ oasis, underbrush, stones, puddles, nothing could stop it in its race against the dark; bent to its liking, it managed to jump the hedges, the holes, the borders and the cushioned peaks; whereupon a sharp pain shook me: the searching head had finally arrived. It poked straight in, stepped back so it could take off, and, my eyes covered but my mind clear, it injected me with such a great pain that I almost tore out my tongue. In spite of a ruby flow which calmed the cruel burning, the iron rod continued higher, and underneath the skin of my belly, I saw it do the snake dance. Like a child discovering a new toy, the little hanger was having fun inside of me, stinging the largest organs to the quick, teasing the littlest ones, going around the longest ones, then, burned by the gears of the working mechanism, it came out glowing from the wound full of blood which didn't stop flowing onto my sheet. (78-79)

If she were to destroy her body, by pushing it to a liminal space like Zohr before her, and render it genderless, she would also be able to liberate herself.

¹⁶ This is a transliteration of an Arabic word for valley (وادي) that, in North Africa, often refers to a riverbed that only contains water during times of heavy rain.

Fikria returns to the natural as she imagines her body and the process by which she would rid herself of its gender. In her description, her body is the oasis, and she imagines its interior is filled with the alluring, natural elements she describes. The beauty of the scene is interrupted when she imagines a hot rod, burning her insides. In this half-hallucination, the mechanism that could liberate her by destroying her feminine insides is the act of penetration. The rod that would free her and ravage her insides is the unnatural; she personifies it as a child that is enjoying his or her destructive mission, both “stinging” and “teasing” her. Despite her pain, she envisions freeing herself of the bodily bondage she has noted around her through this act of resistance. Therefore, she also fetishizes the rod that would damage her insides and do so joyfully.

As her wedding day draws nearer, Fikria channels her hatred of her body in a more specific direction – her sex:

Je relève ma chemise de nuit, un peu tremblante et suspicieuse mais bien vite, très déçue. Mon sexe intact apparaît dans un nouvel éclat : l’Ironie. Il nargue la pièce, les objets, l’étonnement, la question. Est-ce le même qu’hier, avant-hier, est-ce celui du ventre de ma mère ? Oui, c’est le même. Pur, vierge. Un sexe d’adolescente sur un corps d’adolescente. Un sexe traître, soigné, prêt à accueillir un inconnu, prêt à satisfaire l’orgueil, l’espoir et l’attente de la famille, un sexe obsédant qui dérange la jeunesse des filles, les rêves des hommes, un sexe convoité, désiré, imaginé mais rarement satisfait. Centre de la silhouette, épice de plaisir, il étale aujourd’hui sa malice en brillant de tous ses feux comme un emblème cousu que je ne peux arracher de son plastron. (116)

I lift up my nightgown, trembling a bit and suspicious but very quickly a little disappointed. My intact sex appears in a new light: Irony. It defies the room, objects, surprise, the question. Is it the same as yesterday, the day before yesterday, is it the sex from my mother’s womb? Yes, it’s the same. Pure, virgin. The sex of an adolescent girl on the body of an adolescent girl. A traitorous sex, cared for, ready to receive a stranger, ready to satisfy pride, hope and the expectation of a family, an obsessive sex which disturbs the youth of young girls, the dreams of men, a coveted sex, desired and imagined but rarely satisfied. Center of the silhouette, epicenter of pleasure, today it displays its malice by shining with all of its fires like a sewn-on emblem that I can’t rip from its breastplate. (83-84)

This passage follows shortly after Fikria’s hallucinations of destroying her body. She is disappointed to see that her body is intact and shows no sign of the damage she previously

dreamt of inflicting upon it. She knows that because she did not fulfill her desires to penetrate her own body and lay waste to her insides, her body will become a source of pleasure for an unknown man. Having watched her father rape her mother and her mother's inability to control his access to her body, she reflects the irony of the pain her will cause her in spite of and, also, due to the pleasure it will give to someone else. She lists the individuals for whom her sex will be a source of pain or disappointment and notes that although a man will seek to "satisfy [his] pride" using her body, her sex or body will remain unfulfilled or satisfied by anyone or anything. Again, she blames her mother for creating the sex and the body she loathes.

The hatred Fikria feels towards her body and her gender extends itself to all other feminine bodies around her. She criticizes the bodies of women who are strangers, generalizing their shape and significance: "elles sont des tas de graisse insignifiants flottant dans des robes peu seyants ou des corps aux formes disparues toujours proches de l'évanouissement" (26), 'they are unimportant piles of fat floating about in scarcely becoming dresses, or bodies with missing forms, always close to vanishing' (17). As Fikria gazes upon the bodies of women around her, her ability to separate those bodies from what she believes they say about her and her future dissolves. The bodies of women around her become something akin to what Julia Kristeva has theorized as the abject (*Powers* 4) because of the manner in which they disturb Fikria's identity and ability to create meaning out of her own body.

Her inability to allow her own body to have meaning outside of the meaning she ascribes to the feminine, shapeless form she observes is most clearly visible when her aunt Khadija has just arrived to their house and Fikria watches her enter the room:

Tante K. s'affale sur le canapé dont les ressorts subitement tendus à mort couinent de douleur, essoufflée, elle évente son visage avec un foulard fleuri, jette son voile derrière le canapé (il tombe sur la tête de Leyla : en plein jour l'obscurité !) puis remonte sa robe jusqu'aux cuisses. La chair dégoulinante s'étale fièrement sur les coussins, un bas noir

essaye désespérément de retenir la peau capitonnée mais la graisse dévastatrice troue le tulle afin de respirer !

Une chevelure brune rebondit sur son dos, des ongles démesurément longs prolongent ses boudins de chair congestionnés par des bagues trop brillantes, un paquet de peinture sèche sur ses cils et tombe parfois en poudre bleu marine sur le trait grossier d'un khôl sombre. Un rouge gras entoure sa bouche en forme de sexe et se faufile dans des narines si béantes qu'on peut voir se dresser dans les cavités obscures une tapisserie de poils drus. Son corps ? un édredon dans lequel on aimerait bien s'enfoncer tant sa texture semble moelleuse et confortable, mais en regardant de plus près, on oublie vite son empressement ! en effet, des veines éclatées dessinent sur sa peau des petits ruisseaux de sang asséchés qui me donnent une soudaine envie de vomir. Elle porte une robe de lin noir, les boutons du décolleté ont sauté, abandonnant derrière eux du fil et une boutonnière béante. (79-80)

Aunt K. drops onto the couch, its springs suddenly stretched to death, squealing in pain; out of breath, she fans her face with a flowered scarf, throws her veil behind the couch (it falls on Leyla's head: in broad daylight, darkness!) then hikes her dress up to her thighs. The oozing flesh proudly spreads out on the cushions, a black stocking tries desperately to hold back the padded skin but the devastating fat makes a hole in the fabric netting in order to breathe! A brown head of hair bounces onto her back, immeasurably long nails lengthen her fleshy blood-sausage fingers congested by overly shiny rings, a mass of paint dries on her eyelashes and sometimes falls as navy blue powder on the badly drawn line of dark kohl. Greasy lipstick encircles her pussy-shaped mouth and edges into nostrils so gaping that one can see a tapestry of stiff hairs rise up in the dark caverns. Her body? A down comforter you could almost melt into, so velvety and comfortable its texture, but looking closer you quickly lose the urgency! In fact, exploded veins draw little rivers of dried blood on her skin, making me suddenly want to vomit. She is wearing a black linen dress, the neckline buttons have popped, leaving behind a little thread and a gaping button hole. (56-57)

Khadija is presented in contrast to her daughter, Rime who "still possesses the grace of adolescence, making one momentarily forget that she'll be like her mother one day" (56). As Fikria looks upon Khadija, she sees Rime's future, her own future, and the future of all young women who will someday turn into the form she is observing and describing. She invokes the cyclical nature she has previously described, wherein daughters become their mothers and subject their daughters to the same torture they suffered in their adolescence. It is because Fikria sees the bondage of her future in her aunt Khadija that she rejects Khadija's body; Khadija

disgusts Fikria because she threatens Fikria's own ability to separate her body and her femininity from her essence.

Fikria describes the details of Khadija's grotesque femininity and gives meaning to her hair, jewelry, nails, and make-up due to their excess. She presents Khadija's body as vulgar and destructive in its size: it stretches the couch on which she sits, pokes holes in the black stockings she wears, and ruined the black linen dress she is wearing by stretching the material beyond its natural shape. Fikria finds Khadija's make-up sloppy and the features it is intended to highlight grotesque. As she processes Khadija's face, clothing, and body, she notices dried blood on Khadija's skin and explains that the sight of it causes her to want to vomit. She fears that she will become what she sees in Khadija, and thus, her aunt becomes a source of extreme repulsion.

Her aunt Khadija is another alternative maternal presence in Fikria's life. However, in comparison to Ourdhia before her, Khadija's body represents the future to which Fikria feels doomed. Fikria elaborates her mother's relationship with Khadija: she is her mother's closest female relative and although they did not have the same mother, they were raised on the breastmilk produced by the same woman. Thus, Fikria's mother and Khadija regard one another as close family. The circumstances are not elaborated, but their sisterhood and the breastmilk that unites them produces their own alternate understanding of motherhood: they view the woman who nursed them, cared for them, and raised them as more central to their understanding of maternity than the one who birthed them; the role of the mother's breast is privileged over that of her womb.

Both Khadija and Fikria's mother exchange stories from their adolescence and attempt to create a circle of closeness with their respective nieces. Despite the solidarity that the older women attempt to facilitate between themselves and the younger women in the room, Fikria

cannot help but reimagine the bondage that has a hold on them. She explains that the jubilant story-telling is a weak attempt to rewrite one's own past. She returns to the cycle that enslaves women and acknowledges that she will likely do the same thing one day, due to her own need to imagine a life that was better than the one she had. As Fikria observes the slippage between bond and bondage in the scene, she is overwhelmed by its implications for her own sense of self, and she feels as though she might break down.

Marriage and Finality: The Beginning of the End

The bulk of the novel builds towards a culmination: the third moment of rupture in the relationship of bond and bondage between Fikria and her mother – marriage. In this section, I begin by examining the wedding preparations, and I show how they underscore Fikria's experience of the interplay between bonds and bondage leading up to her wedding. She continues to situate the source of the bondage in her body. I examine Bouraoui's use of two literary devices (metaphor and personification) to distinguish the rupture of marriage from the previous two thanks to its finality. Subsequently, I return to the blame Fikria casts on her mother and add to my analysis of Fikria's mother as the enforcer of gender bondage. Finally, I turn to the passages in which Fikria reflects on *becoming woman* (Braidotti) and departs her childhood home for the last time. To conclude, I return to Fikria's notion of cycles of violence, to show how the ending of the novel simultaneously opens up and forecloses the possibility of change in Fikria's life as a married woman.

In the first three parts of the novel, marriage is presented primarily as inevitable despite the fact that there is little concrete evidence. That inevitability crystalizes in the last quarter of the novel as Fikria's family makes concrete preparations for her wedding, and she realizes that

the predestination she imagined is arriving. The days leading up to Fikria's wedding provide, perhaps, the most complex illustration of the manner in which Fikria's relationship with her mother and, by extension, with other maternal presences, can be conceived as a web of bonds and bondage.

The rupture that occurs due to marriage is distinct from the other two ruptures because it is presented as more final. Where the other ruptures resulted in the need for a renegotiation or new balance, this one will not. Marriage represents, on the one hand, initiation into a new family and, on the other, her family's sacrifice of her to an institution. After the rupture due to the initiation/sacrifice, Fikria's relationship with her mother will not resettle into a new balance between bond and bondage. Instead, she will have "become woman," and she will develop relationships that consist of a messy slippage between bond and bondage with her husband and her mother-in-law.

Fikria's narration of the events surrounding her wedding illustrates the manner in which weddings can facilitate bonding experiences for women. However, in most of these interactions, the bonding experience does not include the bride, Fikria. Instead, as the wedding preparations take place, Fikria's mother, aunt, and sister use her and her body to bond with one another over the upcoming events, but Fikria does not benefit from the space of bonding that they create. They allude to her wedding in front of her and assume she is not aware of their scheming, but Fikria understands what is happening and feels left out of the plotting that will affect her directly (86). The women in the room note Fikria's "sad air" but claim that it adds to her femininity and desirability. Fikria feels like she is on the outside, being accosted by compliments, while her mother and Aunt K. are the ones bonding.

In another example, the day before her wedding, Fikria's female relatives come to her room to prepare her body for the marriage ceremony and consummation. The women do not address the act of consummation explicitly and, instead, they concern themselves mostly with the rituals of bodily cleansing, purification and beautification. The space created by the preparation of the body contains unfulfilled potential; the women who have experienced the act of marital consummation could bond with Fikria by sharing their knowledge but, instead, they chat amongst themselves in a speculative tone about the man who Fikria will marry (120-22). The preparation of Fikria's body is described so as to highlight her lack of consent; Fikria is doing nothing to prepare and, instead, she is being prepared by others.

The passage highlights the creation of a feminine space in which Fikria's female family members come together, share a common project, and solidify their notions of family kin. Fikria is an outsider in the dynamic who does not benefit from the connections the women are making. Initially, the closed doors and curtains seem to represent privacy and an obscuration of an outsider's gaze into the room, where Fikria is naked and shaven. However, a rereading of the tightly controlled environment, with women surrounding Fikria, offers the possibility that they are caging Fikria in, preventing her from escaping or looking out the window, rather than preventing anyone else's entrance into the space. She is held in the room by the closures and her female relatives who surveil the process. The women are bonding with one another as they hold Fikria captive in her own bedroom.

The pre-wedding rituals objectify Fikria's body and transform it into a vessel that carries her and is somehow distinct from her. Fikria observes as the women turn their attention to her hair, face, hands, feet, breasts and external sexual organs, transforming them into a project or, to use her words, a "long summer cleaning." Fikria alludes to the level of disconnect she feels from

her body when she uses the pronoun “ce,” or ‘it’ to describe her cleanliness. As they prepare her body, paying little attention to her thoughts or concerns, they further attach Fikria’s bondage to the body over which they are so concerned. Because they are consumed with the project of bodily preparation, they do not notice when she begins tearing up. Their actions and focus on her body render other forms of preparation (such as mental or emotional ones) irrelevant. As they talk amongst themselves, Fikria learns things about the man she will marry, but the only thing someone tells her about him directly is that he is rich. Mostly, she overhears information circulating around her while the women mobilize her wedding to bond with one another.

Where previously in the novel Fikria attempted to curb the points of rupture with bonds of solidarity or by redirecting her frustrations onto external sources of bondage, here she alludes to her sense of impending doom and to the finality of her situation, with her resignation. She says that she has “no taste for revolt” as the women surround her and begin their “operation” (*Forbidden* 86). Instead, she internalizes her resistance and allows it to “rumble” inside of her (*Forbidden* 88). When the scene closes, Fikria says that the women are finished with their project and states that the show is closed, transforming her operation into the final act and adding a sense of permanence to the end she imagines.

As Fikria reflects on the marriage rupture that is about to take place, she returns to her body, and its feminine form, as the object responsible for her bondage. She relies on an extended metaphor (wherein her body is represented by a sacrificial lamb) and a personification (of Death) to show that her body is to blame for the rupture that is about to occur. The imagery of the sacrificial lamb is first evoked while Fikria’s female relatives prepare her body by cleansing and shaving it. She describes the manner in which her body is transported back to its infantile state as the women remove the hair that represents her age. Subsequently, she turns to a description of

the wedding festivities and the feast that is occurring to commemorate the occasion. As she describes the lambs that await consumption, they become a metaphor for her own fate:

Allongé sur un lit de pommes de terre, d'ail, de persil et d'herbes rouges, jambes en l'air, cuisses immobiles, sexes farcis, ventre béant et yeux mi-clos, graisse cirée et chair généreuse, le méchoui attend les doigts dévastateurs. Les moutons décapités en mon honneur dans une baignoire vide puis pleine de sang et de sens, semblent dormir paisiblement loin de la ville, loin de la fête, loin de ma tristesse. (133)

Laid out, on a bed of potatoes, garlic, parsley and red herbs, legs in the air, thighs immobile, sexes stuffed, stomachs gaping and eyes half-closed, grease spread around like wax, and lots of flesh, the *méchoui*¹⁷ waits for the devastating fingers. Decapitated in my honor in an empty bathtub, then full of blood and senses, the sheep seem to sleep peacefully far from the city, far from the celebration, far from my sadness. (96)

This passage connects two previous passages: first, the rape scene, where Fikria watches her mother lie on the floor, with her “heavy and not very agile thighs”¹⁸ as her father takes pleasure in her body; and, second, a passage that follows shortly thereafter, where Fikria states that “ce n’est plus du sang qui coule dans mes veines” (134), ‘blood no longer flows in my veins’ (97). As Fikria looks at the lamb that will soon be consumed, the imagery evokes the bodies of women who also have their “sexes stuffed” and are sacrificed for someone else’s pleasure. Then, she likens her body to the body of the lamb, dead and drained of the blood that once gave it life.

Fikria also uses the figure of Death, who has come to claim her, to emphasize the finality of her predicament and the manner in which the situation is rooted in her body. When she realizes that the time has come for her to be married, she predicts her own demise with “Je suis faite,” (105) or ‘I am done’ (76). Fikria recognizes the arrival of Death because she usually hangs around Zohr, following her like a shadow. However, her most provocative encounter with Death occurs in the dream or hallucinatory state analyzed in section two of this paper.¹⁹ In that passage,

¹⁷ Marcus chose to leave *méchoui* untranslated. It is a transliteration of the Arabic word المشوي, translated literally as “roasted thing,” which refers to a whole lamb roasted on a spit.

¹⁸ See page 49 of this dissertation.

¹⁹ See page 51 of this dissertation.

Death has come to claim her body and leave her genderless by inserting “la tige glacée [...] à travers la nuit de mon plus intime intérieure” (108), or an ‘icy rod’ into ‘the darkness of my most intimate interior’ (78).

Here, Fikria’s feelings toward Death are convoluted, much like the ambiguity with which pain and agency are presented earlier in the text. She is scared and in pain, but also views Death as the only force that could liberate her from the bondage of her body. If Death were to visit her and leave her genderless, by ruining the sex that gives her value to her mother and to the man who seeks to marry her, then she would be able to escape the new form of bondage that is being crafted for her without her consent. She feels powerless when Death arrives (113), and although she awakes from the hallucinatory state relieved that her belly is intact, she describes the possibility of its destruction as a “seductive” metaphor. She interprets her dream as an omen of what is to come and of the corporeal bondage that awaits her because she is not genderless (114). Death is a “black monster” who awaits her and will claim her shortly because her stomach and her sex are intact.

Although Fikria centers the source of her bondage on her feminine body, her parents, and especially her mother, exploit her body and receive her blame. Fikria portrays her father as benefitting or profiting from her bondage in a calculated manner. She imagines him negotiating the terms of her bondage with another man in a separate room:

Dans une chambre inconnue, les Sarrasins, éloignés de leur dissemblables, égrènent le temps en buvant des petits verres jaunes remplis à ras bord d’alcool anisé. Ils fument, ils parlent fort en se tapant sur les cuisses, ils dansent et se caressent. Dans une antichambre inconnue, mon père négocie l’avenir avec un visage masqué. Étrange croisement de deux alliances étrangères. (129)

In an unknown room the Saracen men, distanced from their dissimilars, finger the beads of time by downing little yellow glasses over-flowing with aniseed alcohol. They smoke, they talk loudly and slap their thighs, they dance and they caress each other. In an

unknown waiting room my father negotiates the future with a masked face. Strange meeting of two foreign alliances. (93)

The conditions of Fikria's marriage, the room in which they are being discussed, and the face of the man with whom they are being discussed, remain obscure to Fikria. However, she recognizes that the business of marriage is her father's realm. He negotiates the terms of kinship that will ensue and remains present in his absence as he controls her fate.

The blame Fikria casts on her mother is much more direct. Fikria's mother is visible throughout the wedding festivities and she is elated by the celebration. Previously, Fikria had guessed that her mother would seek her own validation or revenge by marrying Fikria off and subjecting her to someone else's surveillance. As Fikria observes her mother fluttering about the party, this premonition comes to life and Fikria's mother emerges as "the guilty one," despite the transaction in which her father is participating (126-28). Fikria's mother is the one who most benefits socially from the events that are unfolding. She "boasts" about her daughter and the quality of their relationship bond, describing what she considers to be an ideal mother-daughter bond with Fikria. The confusing nature of Fikria's feelings towards her mother are distilled in the last couple lines of the passage, where Fikria imagines cutting her mother "to pieces with kisses" and having "murderous thoughts" about what she would like to do to her mother (*Forbidden* 91-92). She loathes her mother for the manner in which she is benefitting from sacrificing her daughter, but she also sees her future self in her mother and feels a bond of understanding for her situation.

Conclusion

Fikria describes the final rupture, when she is married to a man, as the last phase in her *becoming woman*. From the time Fikria was born and experienced the first rupture, she began

living out a specific predestination, but she experimented with and worked to undo her eventual slip into fulfilling the expectations of others. Rosi Braidotti has described the manner in which the feminist subject is a “subject-in-process; a mutant; the other of the Other; a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis” (45). *La voyageuse interdite* (and Fikria’s adolescence) highlights Fikria’s experimentation with dreams of *becoming mutant*, to use Braidotti’s word, such as in her hallucinatory dream where she maims her body in hopes of making it unrecognizable. However, as the certainty of her marriage congeals around her, so does the fatal eventuality that will fall upon her exercises in *becoming mutant* and carving out her own feminist subjectivity.

At the time of Fikria’s birth, her mother’s examination of her genitals produced the possibility that she would *become* an antifeminist woman, defined in opposition to a masculine subject, but that possibility was the same as the one given to Zohr or Leyla. However, unlike them, Fikria’s relationship to her mother, to her body, and to her subjectivity changed when her body betrayed her and began menstruating. Neither of her sisters is eligible for the same antifeminist subjectivity, because neither of them is seen as fertile and, thus, able to fulfill their reproductive destiny. Fikria’s bondage lies in her body and in an external validation or violation of it.

The final rupture and, specifically, the act of penetration that accompanies it, will transform Fikria’s body into the body of a woman (103-04), but into that of a socially and maternally sanctioned vision of *woman*. In Marcus’s translation of *La voyageuse*, we see that “devenir une femme” is translated as ‘become a woman.’ However, “femme” can also be translated colloquially to mean ‘wife,’ so “devenir une femme” can have the double-meaning of ‘become a wife, become a woman.’ In other words, the very language of the passage points to

the necessity of becoming a wife and fulfilling conjugal duties in order to fully become a woman. The irony of Fikria's becoming woman (according to the definition proposed by the text) is that through the process of becoming woman, she imagines she will die or cease to be herself.

The rupture of her wedding and marriage consummation will result in a severing of her relationship with her mother, because her mother will have terminated it and handed her over to a new source of bonds and bondage (her husband and mother-in-law):

Escortée par les femmes, je descends l'escalier en prenant garde de ne pas trébucher. Voilée, il ne me reste qu'un œil pour compter les dernières secondes qui me transportent vers le dernier instant. La sève de l'aventure coulait des murs, et des larmes opaques roulaient à ses pieds. La porte d'entrée s'ouvre. [...] Poussée par ma mère, je m'engouffre dans l'antré métallique ; j'eus seulement le temps de capturer un regard accusateur et une porte noire se refermait sur mon voile. [...] Une secousse ébranla le moteur, et, encerclée de fleurs, je me dirigeai vers une nouvelle histoire.

Derrière la camionnette, une cohorte de chiens suivait. (143)

Escorted by the women, I go down the staircase taking care not to stumble. Veiled, I have only one eye left to count the last seconds which transport me to the last instant. The essence of the adventure flowed from the walls, and at the foot of the walls rolled dark tears. The front door opens. [...] Pushed by my mother, I am engulfed by the metallic lair; I had just enough time to catch an accusatory look and a black door closed again on my veil. [...] A shaking set the motor into motion, and, surrounded by flowers, I headed for a new story.

A pack of dogs trailed behind the van. (103)

In this final scene, the women who prepared her body for her wedding night serve as her body guards as she makes her way out of the home for the final time. As in the preceding scenes, they surround her and surveil her actions, making sure that she stays caged until their usefulness expires. When Fikria reaches the threshold, her mother pushes her, giving her the final shove necessary to seal her fate and make sure she never returns.

As Fikria departs into the street and embarks on a journey that will take her away from the bondage of her previous life, Bouraoui implies as question: will Fikria find a way to *become*

mutant? She will no longer be beholden to the bondage established in her relationships to the maternal presences in her life, but the bondage of her body remains intact, provoking us to ask whether she will break the cycle she has observed around her, or if she will reproduce the mothering (Chodorow) she has lived to this point. Her kinship ties to the mother figures in her life have shaped her and her critical lens of the world she observes around her, and now she needs to negotiate with a new set of forces in order to determine to what extent she will be able to shape her future family life.

Chapter Two

Divorce and Alternate Bonds of Paternity: The Bondage of Intersectional Masculinity and *Saudade*

Je leur adresse un sourire fraternel « Salam oua rlikoum ! »²⁰ Je me force à profiter de la vie. Allez, allez, faut pas se laisser attaquer par les méduses de la mélancolie. Je dois trouver de la ressource. Je respire encore un grand coup. Je soliloque à haute voix, la Bretagne est une île et ses habitants des nomades comme ceux de ma tribu, je n'ai aucune raison d'avoir peur d'eux, au contraire, aux plis de leurs visages, on voit bien qu'ils savent ce que partir veut dire. Ils ont leur identité en poupe, prêts à l'abordage sur toutes les rives du monde.

-- Azouz Begag, *Salam Ouessant*

*I greet them with a brotherly smile, "Salam oua rlikoum!" I force myself to make the most of my life. Come now, let's not let ourselves succumb to melancholia. I need to shore up my resources. I take a deep breath in. I talk to myself out loud and remind myself that Brittany is an island and its inhabitants are nomads like the people of my tribe. There is no reason to be afraid of them. On the contrary, based on their facial expressions, it is clear that they understand the meaning of departure. They have their identity figured out and they are ready to take off and see every corner of the world.*²¹

Azouz Begag is one of the most famous French writers of the *génération beur*.²² His father immigrated to France in 1949, his mother followed during the Algerian War for Independence, and they settled in a "bidonville," or "shantytown," outside of Lyons, where Azouz was born in 1957 (Hargreaves 13). Most of Begag's novels and his doctoral thesis examine the ability, or lack thereof, of individuals of North African descent to integrate into French society or culture. His work, both literary and academic, has attracted a lot of attention, and from 2005 to 2007 he held public office as a minister of "Promotion de l'égalité des chances." Today, he has written nearly two dozen books that comprise both novels and academic

²⁰ Arabic salutation.

²¹ My translation.

²² See Terrasse.

texts on the issues surrounding immigration in France. He maintains an active academic profile and vocal stance on various social media outlets, where he weighs in on politics and current events. At times, his stance on social issues has been met with controversy.²³

His 2012 novel, *Salam Ouessant*, both fits neatly within and departs from his previous writing. It can be read as third in a series of three novels that examine Begag's personal life and contain many autobiographical details. The first of those three was his début novel, *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986), which sold 15,000 copies in the first six months after its publication and surged in sales following a controversy surrounding the use of the novel as assigned reading in a school in Lyons (Hargreaves 35). *Le Marteau pique-cœur* (2004), takes up the story of Begag's life several decades later and examines his divorce from his wife (Duffy 219). Similarly to each of these previous novels, *Salam Ouessant* focuses on the experiences of a Beur protagonist, based largely on Begag himself, and has a semi-autobiographical tone. Basing her argument on a 2012 interview with the author, Pat Duffy asserts that one of the central themes of *Salam Ouessant* is self-discovery (227), much like the two aforementioned novels. However, it moves away from earlier work (and the emphasis on individualism within that work), by focusing instead on the effects that immigration and cross-cultural contact can have on family units.

The novel follows the story of an unnamed protagonist, who is also the narrator (and to whom I refer to from here on out as either the narrator, the protagonist, or Azouz),²⁴ as he attempts to develop a relationship with his young daughters after his divorce from their mother. He has arranged a weeklong vacation for the threesome to take together during his brief period of

²³ For example, see "Hostages of Authenticity: Paul Smaïl, Azouz Begag, and the Invention of the Beur Author" (2009), in which Liz Brozgal argues that, "in his quest to foster the creation of historical documents—novels that are legitimated by their verisimilitude—Begag runs the risk of evacuating fiction and poetic license from the writing enterprise" (126).

²⁴ I use Begag to refer to the author and Azouz to refer to the narrator or character of the same name.

summer custody, and he chooses to take them to Ouessant, a small island in the English Channel that marks the north-westernmost point in France. Since the divorce, he lacks the level of emotional connection he desires with his daughters, and he hopes that quality time and a trip together will facilitate a stronger bond between them. The girls, Sophia and Zola, miss their mother and are disappointed in their father's choice of vacation spot; they express to him repeatedly that they would have liked to have travelled to Algeria, where there is sunshine and warmth. Though the protagonist has two Algerian parents, he was born in Lyon, feels thoroughly Lyonnais,²⁵ and has a complicated relationship to his Algerianness. He believes that his daughters are mistaken, and that a trip to Algeria, especially during the summer, would only have torn them further apart.

The source of the narrator's lack of parental bond with the girls is located in a series of sites of bondage that stem from much further in Azouz's past than his recent divorce from their mother. He takes the reader back into his adolescence in a series of flashback stories where he clarifies, sometimes explicitly, the events that have shaped him into an individual who struggles to have the emotional connections he desires. Through his narration, he actively contemplates the differences between the dichotomous tribal notions²⁶ of family that produced him, and the definition of family that constantly surrounds him in France as he attempts to develop bonds with his daughters. Azouz reveals the effects of his upbringing and his Beur identity on his current familial relationships in both the literary present and these narrated memories. Meanwhile, the

²⁵ Démonym for a resident of the city of Lyon, France.

²⁶ The author frequently uses the words "tribal" and "tribe" to refer to or describe his family, the significance of which is elaborated later in this chapter.

girls remain unhappy with his choice to take them to Ouessant throughout the duration of the story and estrange the reader through their obstinacy.²⁷

Azouz feels a heavy sense of foreboding as he asks himself whether he will ever succeed in his quest to develop new familial bonds with the girls:

Brusquement, la pluie. Elle s'est mise à tomber en fléchettes, piquante, pénétrante, repoussante. Ça avait l'air d'une attaque aérienne, un Pearl Harbor breton. Cette fois, j'étais défait. Une artère s'est bouchée dans mon cœur. Une arête s'est plantée dans ma langue. Mon moral est descendu d'un cran. (21-22)

Suddenly, rain. It started falling like arrows from the sky... stinging... penetrating... repelling. It felt like an aerial attack... a Breton Pearl Harbor. This time, I was defeated. An artery in my heart clogged up. A fishbone pieced my tongue. My spirits fell a notch.

Passages such as this one, that describe the effect of the Breton rain and Azouz's inability to give his daughters the Algerian sunshine they desire, provoke the question as to whether or not Azouz will find a way to relate to the girls. Unfortunately for the reader, the answer is never clear but, fortunately for Azouz, the novel concludes on a hopeful note; perhaps the trip will help him cultivate the bonds he wants, albeit in a very different way than the one he intended.

Azouz's difficulty in developing the relationship bonds he seeks with his daughters can be traced to a series of sources. First, he is encumbered by his masculinity, which provokes challenges in intimacy, in both his parental role and in the partner role he explored with his former wife. He fears that those same obstacles will persist as he forges forward and strives to carve out a new set of familial structures. Second, Azouz is haunted by past experiences. Some of those hauntings are due to occurrences in his own life as the child of immigrants, and others come from elsewhere in his family tree. And third, Azouz struggles with and contemplates the meaning of *saudade*. This term is common in the Portuguese language and it "denotes a

²⁷ The story synopsis on the back cover of the book refers to the girls as "pestes de filles" or 'pain-in-the-neck daughters.'" For a second example, see Toumi.

nostalgic, bittersweet longing.” It is an important cultural trope in both Portugal and its previous colonies (Giorgi 2), and the protagonist contemplates both its meaning and its effect on his life.

Azouz’s position as a male whose parents are from Algeria imbued him with a specific understanding of what his masculinity should look like. In *Men of the World: Genders, Globalizations, Transnational Times*, Jeff Hearn argues that “men are still not characteristically ‘marked’ as gendered” (4). He lists “transnational work-family/household/life relations” as one of his “key contemporary arenas of global and transnational gender relations” (21), and he gestures at the notion that gender, and therefore masculinity, affects the transnational family. *Salam Ouessant* highlights the role of masculinity in familial bonds. It presents the reader with “a narratological model of identity, rather than a territorial demarcation of masculinity or femininity studies” (Nichols et al. 76). In a series of flashbacks, the novel provides insight into how Azouz’s perceptions of masculinity came to be. During the scenes that occur contemporaneously with his weeklong vacation, those same notions continue to affect him. This chapter asks how Azouz’s transnational masculine identity becomes a source of bondage for him as he works to develop the intimate familial bonds he desires.

In order to ask how Azouz’s notions of masculinity impede him from finding intimate spaces, I rely on Vaughn G. Sinclair and Sharon W. Dowdy’s sociological work, “Development and Validation of the Emotional Intimacy Scale.” They define emotional intimacy as “a perception of closeness to another that allows sharing of personal feelings, accompanied by expectations of understanding, affirmation, and demonstration of caring” (193). Despite a long history of struggling with intimacy, Azouz’s divorce from his former wife leads to an opportunity for him to renegotiate boundaries of intimacy with his daughters. In this way, for Azouz, the divorce represents an opening rather than a closure or an ending. In the face of that

opportunity, he attempts to create an alternative, paternal bond that is different from the one he had with his father or from the one he currently has with his daughters — he seeks to develop what he refers to as “notre trio familial” (127) or a ‘familial threesome’ into a familial space that is fulfilling for him and for his daughters. Despite the sites of bondage that impede him from finding intimacy, the novel does eventually give way to an argument that there is hope for Azouz in his quest to develop bonds, once the ghosts that haunt him have been exhumed.

Salam Ouessant contains a series of non-literal ghosts, or hauntings, that affect Azouz in his day-to-day. Those hauntings include previous version of Azouz, himself, the presence of his deceased older brother, Malik, the impressions left behind by a childhood best friend, Yvon (originally from Ouessant), and the trauma of arriving at his current, masculine state.²⁸ These ghosts and legacies from his past continually haunt the narrator and prevent him from finding the alternate kinship structures for which he longs.

The presence of that which is absent and the allusion to the future absence of that which is present in *Salam Ouessant* brings to mind philosopher Jacques Derrida’s *hauntology*. Derrida coined the term, a portmanteau of the words haunting and ontology, in his 1993 book, *Spectres de Marx*. In literary criticism, “hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (Davis 373). The hauntings that affect Azouz remain present both in spite of and thanks to their absence, and they become one of the sites of Azouz’s bondage, getting between him and the relationships he desires. Derrida’s theories of hauntology allow us

²⁸ One could argue (and I, in fact, might) that Malik and Yvon more closely resemble literal ghosts or phantoms. However, such an argument is outside the scope of this study and, thus, I reserve this argument for another time.

to reprioritize the role of the always present past and ask what it would take for Azouz to transform his hauntological bondage in order to deepen his familial connections.

Since the publication of Derrida's work, scholars in literary studies have made great use of it to analyze the presence of ghosts, specters, phantoms and hauntings in literary texts. One notable example is Esther Rashkin's *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (1992), which examines the role of psychoanalytic theory and phantoms in literary studies. In a second example, Jarrod Hayes describes "the ghosts conjured up [in this study] result from repressions that are not only psychological but also political; although they haunt the family tree, their significance extends far beyond their individual families into the realm of the collective, both past and present" (*Queer Roots* 25).

Studies such as these inform my ability to trace the presence of what I call unmourned ghosts in *Salam Ouessant*. The power of Azouz's hauntological bondage lies, in part, in his avoidance of it. Due to his preconceived notions of masculinity, he evades processing or mourning the challenges of his past. The unmourned remains present in Azouz's conscience and produces a nostalgia for the past, for the future, and, perhaps most importantly, for the alternative in the present. Thus, as we will see in what follows, the bondage of the unmourned becomes the impetus for alternate bonds.

Azouz uses a word in Portuguese, that is often considered untranslatable by members of the Lusophone world, to name the result of his bondage of the unmourned ghosts – *saudade*:²⁹

Avec Yvon, j'ai appris que les méandres de la mélancolie sont tortueux et que la douleur d'être loin de chez soi ne se mesure pas en kilomètres sur une carte Michelin. C'est une

²⁹ The term appears in a variety of culturally significant contexts, including the music of Cape Verdean artist Cesária Évora and the writing of Fernando Pessoa (who was not only a prolific poet, but also a philosopher who theorizes the meaning of the word *saudade*). Artists such as Teixeira de Pascoaes promoted a patriotic vision of the term by contending that only the Portuguese were capable of experiencing the emotion and that *saudade* connotes "the special longing [...] incarnated the Portuguese soul" (Giorgi 3).

émotion à fleur de peau, un petit vertige de chaque jour qui ronge l'âme, une vague, qui creuse incessamment. Yvon m'a fait découvrir l'éternel regret d'avoir laissé quelque chose derrière soi. Les Portugais l'appellent *saudade*. C'est ce sentiment que les chanteurs de fado³⁰ vont puiser au fond de leurs entrailles, les yeux fermés. L'histoire d'un homme solitaire qui a perdu dans un port une amarre, une attache, ses origines. (58)

From Yvon I learned that the twists and turns of melancholia are torturous and that the pain of being far from home can't be measured in kilometers on a Michelin map. It's a hypersensitive emotion, a tiny vertigo you experience each day that gnaws at your soul, a wave, that continually grows stronger. Yvon helped me discover the eternal regret of having left something behind. The Portuguese call it *saudade*. It's that feeling that fado singers pull out from the depths of their insides, their eyes closed. The story of a single, lonely man who has lost, in a bitter port, his attachment to his origins.

Azouz, having no formal ties to Portugal, uses the term to designate Yvon's experiences of migration explicitly. However, what Azouz is less conscious of is that he is also relating to the term because of how he can apply it to his own feelings of *saudade*. In the narrative present, Azouz is the "homme solitaire" or 'single, lonely man.'

Azouz's *saudade* is a melancholic sadness that results from the memories that haunt him or, put differently, his unmourned experiences. In her article, "The Motif of 'Crossings' in Selected Works by Azouz Begag," Duffy posits that Azouz's experiences with *saudade*³¹ are an inevitable product of his life "between countries," where "any direction seems to lead to regret, sadness and confusion" (219). His *saudade* produces a feeling of longing for something alternate to his present condition and, in turn, becomes a new source of bondage. That longing results in his mental bondage, which prevents him from forming new, intimate bonds with his daughters in the literary present.

Finding Fatherly Intimacy? — Reconciling Intersectional Bondage with New Family Bonds

³⁰ Fado is a Portuguese music genre. It often follows a specific structure and is characterized by its melancholic tone and lyrics. See Richard Elliott's *Fado and the Place of Longing: Loss, Memory and the City* (2010).

³¹ She does not use the word explicitly.

One of the main reasons Azouz struggles to develop the relationships he desires with his daughters is that he suffers from the bondage that lies at the intersection of his identities as a man and as the child of immigrants. I borrow the concept of intersectionality, initially coined by feminist, critical-race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, to describe Azouz's bondage as the product of interwoven identities. Since its conception, intersectionality theory has been used in a wide variety of contexts to show that "'additive analyses' of the situation of those women subject not only to sexism but also to other forms of oppression such as racism [...] end up erasing from view the very women meant to be under consideration" (Spelman, 16). In her article, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," sociologist Patricia Collins explains that "the term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (1). Additionally, scholars of the social sciences have reworked the theory in order to point out that minority identities can be specific to their cultural or regional context. For example, in their recently published article "Race, Class, and Gender in Boys' Education: Repositioning Intersectionality Theory," Joseph Derrick Nelson et al. argue that "boys' identities are distinctly gendered, racialized, and classed across disparate social and cultural contexts" (171) to contend that intersectionality theory uniquely informs the phenomenon that has been called a "crisis" in boys' education (172). Within the specific context of school, being a boy constitutes one facet or portion of a minority identity, even though the social category "boy" is not typically considered a minority identity by scholars of gender studies.³²

³² For a second example of research that shows that "boy" or "man" can be a minority identity in a specific context, see Marissa Urias and J. Wood's article, "The Effect of Non-Cognitive Outcomes on Perceptions of School as a Feminine Domain among Latino Men in Community College."

Azouz's manliness is informed equally by, first, hegemonic notions of masculinity in France and, second, the North African models of what it means to be a man laid out for him by his family. His position as a boy or man in his family informs his ideas about what it means to be a member of his "tribe," to be the child of immigrants, or to be of Algerian/North African descent more broadly. This intersectional position developed during the protagonist's youth as he learned that he was an "outsider" in France. Young Azouz internalized that, as an Algerian man, he must exercise emotion maintenance and not reveal his internal turmoils to the world around him. His process of emotion maintenance resulted in a lack of intimacy with the family and friends who surrounded him as well as a fear of cultivating intimacy in the future. In turn, young Azouz experienced isolation, which carried over into his adult life, and causes him to experience *saudade* in the literary present. These layers of experience, informed by identity, have produced the bondage that holds Azouz in a state of limbo as he works to develop intimate relationships with his daughters.

Azouz began developing and experiencing the bondage of his intersectional identity as boy/child-of-immigrants when he was young. As he reflects on his formative childhood experiences throughout the novel, he describes a distinct feeling of outsidership. In the following passage, an excerpt from his childhood journal, he posits a definition of outsidership by distinguishing the outsiders from insiders:

Mes ancêtres ne sont ni gaulois, ni romains, ni burgondes, ni vandales. Ce sont des cavaliers arabes venus avec les armées d'Abd al-Rahman jusqu'à Poitiers en 732. Mais je ne le dis à personne.

« Arabe » est un gros mot. (68)

My ancestors are not Gauls, or Romans, or Burgundies, or Vandals. They were Arab horseman who came with Abd al-Rahman's troops all the way to Poitiers in 732.³³ But I don't say that to anyone.

³³ Reference to the advancement of the Umayyad (caliphate established after the death of Mohammed) across the southern part of France, toward the Loire River, in 732.

“Arab” is a curse word.

He defines “insiders” by their ancestral origins (Gauls, Romans, Burgundies, and Vandals), and everyone else remains an “outsider.” Azouz’s ancestors not only make him an outsider, but also make up a group that he perceives as taboo. The passage distills young Azouz’s evolving perception of his roots and includes an irony made up of equal parts shame and pride. In other words, during his adolescence, he rejects his Arab ancestral origins because of the outsidership they imposed on him. He juxtaposes a summary of an impressive ancestral military feat against that rejection, as if he is proud of their conquest of French territory in the 8th century. His conclusion, however, is that in France he should avoid reminding anyone of who his ancestors were or where he comes from in order to avoid using “curse words.”

In a second definition of what it means to be an outsider in France, Yvon, the narrator’s childhood best friend and Ouessant native, terms insiders and outsiders “indigènes” and “allogènes” respectively. His definition departs from the protagonist’s because it posits that insiders and outsiders are defined by their birthplace rather than their origins:

Comme mon frère Malik, [Yvon] adorait se défendre avec des mots qu’il taillait en lames de couteaux. Ainsi, c’est lui qui m’annonça un jour que j’étais un indigène lyonnais. « Indigène ? » Je m’étais cabré. Ce mot me rebutait. Je me souvenais qu’en Algérie les Français en colonie appelaient ainsi les gens de ma tribu. Voilà pourquoi je croyais que mes parents étaient des primitifs qui vivaient dans les arbres et sautaient de liane en liane entre les oliviers, vêtus de peaux de mouton, un poignard entre les dents. [...] Mais au contact d’Yvon [...] j’ai cessé d’avoir honte de mes ascendants.

« Je suis un indigène, né à l’hôpital Édouard-Herriot de Lyon ! » j’avais crié à Yvon.

Il s’était bien marré. [...] Heureux de ma métamorphose, le Breton m’avait ensuite demandé si je connaissais le contraire d’un indigène. J’avais haussé les épaules. J’allais dire un Arabe, un musulman, quand il a lâché : « Un allogène. » (59-60)

Like my brother Malik, [Yvon] loved defending himself with cutting words that he sculpted carefully with razor sharp knives. Thus, he was the one who told me one day that I was an indigène of Lyon. “Indigène?” I reacted strongly. That word disgusted me. I remembered that in Algeria, the French colonizers called people of my tribe by that word. That was why I thought my relatives were primitive people who lived in trees and jumped from branch to branch, dressed in sheepskin, with a dagger between their teeth. [...] But when I met Yvon [...] I stopped feeling ashamed of my predecessors.

“I am an indigène, born at Hospital Édouard-Herriot in Lyon!” I yelled out at Yvon. He had a good laugh. [...] I was happy with my metamorphosis, and the Breton then asked me if I knew what the opposite of an indigène was. I shrugged my shoulders. I was going to say an Arab or a Muslim, when he said, “An allogène.”

Here, thanks to Yvon’s definition of what constitutes an insider versus an outsider, Azouz complicates his own feelings of insider or outsidership.

Azouz’s initial reaction to being called an “indigène” is repulsion; he is unable to dissociate the word from the racially charged association he had ascribed to it before due to legacies of France’s colonial past. The past makes itself visible in the present through Azouz’s memories of what a particular word is supposed to imply about his people. However, Yvon teaches Azouz to appropriate the word, apply it to himself, and imbue it with new meaning. As he cries out, « Je suis un indigène, né à l’hôpital Édouard-Herriot de Lyon ! » he attaches new importance to the fact that he was born on French soil and feels proud of that fact. (He also unknowingly invokes the name of a radical politician of the Third Republic, Édouard Herriot,³⁴ and unties the false notion that French politicians are united in their views.) Ironically, the progress he makes in destabilizing the categories of insider and outsider falls apart at the end of the passage when he imagines that the opposite of an insider is an Arab or a Muslim. Even in light of his new definition, Arabs and Muslims are outsiders; he is just no longer one of them.

Although the narrator flirts temporarily with the idea that he is an insider, his feelings of insidership are short-lived due to his numerous encounters with racism. His emphasis on his birthplace is a product of his constant fear that he will be stopped and asked to show his documentation (43). He recalls being confronted with racism in the form of racial slurs (20) and, sometimes, even violence. In one particular scenario, a young boy named Francis, beats him up and yells “Tu manges le pain des Français !” (44) “You eat bread that belongs to the French!”

³⁴ See Stone’s chapter 3 notes, Courtois (159), and Larmour.

Thanks in part to his name, Francis can be read as a metaphorical stand-in for France, and his attitude toward Azouz as a representation of how France views its immigrant population. While many young, Beur protagonists experience racism and discrimination as they grow up in France, boy protagonists seem more likely to encounter firsthand, physical violence. Here, Azouz's interactions with Francis, and the violence that ensues, are informed by their masculinity and by Azouz's intersectional identity as the son of immigrants.

In his adult life, the outsidership young Azouz experienced develops into the bondage that prevents him from relating to his daughters. The racism he experiences as an adult is much more subtle and coded than when he was a child. For example, when he introduces himself to M. Le Bihan, the owner of a bike shop on Ouessant, Le Bihan frames the dichotomy of insider vs. outsider within language of where Azouz is from: "Il a fait, et vous êtes d'où ? J'ai répondu de Lyon. Il a dit oui, mais avant ? J'ai dit avant, rien. Il n'y avait pas d'avant. J'étais un spermatozoïde," (25), 'He asked where I was from. I responded, from Lyon. He said yes, but what about before? I said before, nowhere. There was no before. I was a sperm cell.'

Le Bihan insists on Azouz's outsidership by pushing the question of where he is from even after Azouz gives him an answer. Azouz reveals the influence of his masculinity on his intersectional identity when he describes that before birth, he was a sperm cell, as opposed to an egg. Instead of feeling confused by the questions, like he might have as a child, Azouz asserts his agency in the situation by interpreting the question how he wants to — he knows that Le Bihan is actually fishing for more than a birthplace, but he refuses to give him the information he seeks. His choice not to respond to where he was from "before" represents a choice to interpret the man's question literally, rather than allowing him invade his privacy through coded language.

While his past experiences with racism affect his responses to certain questions, he continues to feel alone and isolated in his intersectional identity.

Azouz's isolation and the manner in which his masculinity and Beur identities are interwoven is best illustrated in the conflict that he perceives between two sets of family models. In the first set, Azouz describes a "tribal" version of family that was modeled for him as he grew up with his Algerian parents. Paul James, who works through the dilemma of establishing a definition of words such as "tribe" or "tribalism" in his scholarship, explains that "certain theoreticians of the concept have resorted to the convention of self-naming in definition-formation" (29). Given these parameters, Azouz's family is a tribe because he names it as such. Additionally, James offers a definition of what he calls "customary tribalism":

A certain kind of community in which persons are bound beyond immediate family ties by the dominance of modalities of face-to-face and object integration, including genealogical placement, embodied reciprocity and mythological enquiry. Historically, the most sustained of these modalities has proved to be *genealogical placement* - that is, extended kinship relations, either blood-related or constituted around others ways of placement. (29)

Perhaps it is not in anyone's best interest to pin down a definition of tribalism, which can only be limiting in its inflexibility. James's work serves as a framework that illustrates the manner in which Azouz's understandings of his family, as a tribal one, are outside the scope of a Western nuclear family, defined by "immediate family ties." Within this understanding of kinship, Azouz's father was his primary model of tribal fatherhood and masculinity.

The second family model, to which Azouz was presumably introduced later in life, seems to oppose the tribal one he grew up with: the nuclear family. Azouz married a French woman and recalls asking her father for her hand in marriage, only to be told that the decision was entirely hers and to be accused of approaching the issue of marriage in a misogynist fashion (20). The issue of gender and a woman's voice in her marriage aside, Azouz's former wife's father implies

that the decision to marry is an individual one that it does not require familial consent or involve the family. His definition of family would more likely align with a nuclear one, wherein upon marriage, his daughter would have left his family and started her own. Additionally, Azouz had children with his former wife, in France. Both she and the French society that surrounded them (impersonated largely in the text by the French judicial system), imposed a normative, nuclear vision of family on him. He does not have a model of masculinity within the nuclear family schema. Azouz feels alone in the face of these conflicting definitions of family and his isolation causes him to feel he has failed to negotiate between the two models set before him.

From his parents, Azouz inherited the notion that raising children is a community effort and that it is a man's obligation to keep his word. Both of these notions are marked by and maintained in his intersectional identity. In the face of his divorce, he is alone in his perception that either of those things is true, which ends up complicating matters in his custody discussions. Here, Azouz reveals his perspectives on child-rearing and on a man's/father's responsibilities within child-rearing:

Je me suis défendu calmement : mes deux trésors n'avaient pas besoin de surveillance particulière, j'avais une flopée de frères, sœurs, neveux, nièces et parents qui ne demandaient qu'à s'occuper d'elles, ils les adoraient encore plus que moi, chez les *Ouled Bendiab* l'éducation était une affaire de tribu, pas seulement d'individus, et je n'avais pas besoin de textes législatifs pour assurer mon devoir de père. J'avais donné ma parole d'homme. La dame a répondu : « On en a vu d'autres » (84-85).

I calmly defended myself: my two angels didn't need a previously outlined childcare arrangement. I had a flurry of brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and relatives that asked me incessantly to look after them; they love them more than they love me. Among the people of *Ouled Bendiab*,³⁵ raising children is a tribal affair, not just an individual one, and I didn't need legal documents to make sure I would do my job as a father. I had given my word as a man. The woman responded, "That's what they all say."

³⁵ Small locality or town in the northwest corner of Algeria.

The narrator's inherited cultural model is one in which childcare is "une affaire de tribu" and one in which his "devoir de père" should suffice as a guarantee. His notions of family consist of "les *Ouled Bendiab*" generally, and "une flopée de frères, sœurs, neveux, nièces et parents," more specifically; that is to say, Azouz's understanding of family and masculine duty or obligation are at odds with both his wife's and those of the French court system, which would define child-rearing as a nuclear family responsibility and legal documents that define it as such. Azouz's outsidership turns to isolation as he observes these two mismatched cultural models and is baffled by his Western environment, wherein the nuclear family model is the rule. The points to the source of Azouz's challenge developing kinship bonds that work for him.

Azouz's isolation through the divorce process is due in part to his inability to negotiate its terms using the precedent set out before him by other men in his family. The model he grew up around was one in which "tant de fois j'avais entendu mon père sceller un pacte, un prêt d'argent, des fiançailles par un simple mot donné, que je sacralisais les mots des hommes" (36) 'I had heard my father seal so many pacts, lend and borrow money, agree on a marriage...with a simple verbal agreement.' His father even went so far as to tell him explicitly that a man was worth nothing without his word: "Un homme c'est sa parole, disait-il avec solennité. Quand il n'y a plus de parole, il n'y a plus d'homme" (37) 'A man is his word, he would say solemnly. When he loses his word, he loses himself.'

Therefore, the notion of word or verbal commitment becomes inextricably linked to essence and, more specifically, masculine essence. In a heavily gendered worldview where "a man is his word," Azouz sees the use of contracts and the courtroom as a personal affront on both his essence and his manliness. He asserts that men of his upbringing keep their word when it comes to familial obligations in an attempt to convince his former wife that they can arbitrate

their divorce themselves, but she is not persuaded. The legal process as it is set out by the French court system emasculates him by making his word worthless and replacing it with legal documents, so Azouz rejects the French legal system and its sterile approach to deciding on family matters. The tension between his understanding of how the divorce should be settled and his wife's is due to his intersectional identity, which puts him at a disadvantage in the custody battle.

The legacy of Azouz's inherited intersectional identity is most visible as he reflects on interactions with his father. He elaborates how he believes (what he perceives as) his father's shortcomings have directly contributed to his own. In one scene, he recounts a memory of his father attempting to tell stories from his youth:

Il voulait m'éviter de devenir trop vieux, trop tôt, comme lui, et de rater l'arrivée du printemps. Sauf une fois où il a tenté une escapade : il avait décidé de se mettre à table. Il ouvrait enfin la première page du livre de son histoire. Mes yeux étaient braqués sur ses lèvres. Il a adressé quelques formules d'introduction à Dieu et aux ancêtres de notre tribu, puis il a commencé par se frotter les mains comme pour des ablutions avant la prière : « Bon, puisque tu insistes, je vais te raconter quelques histoires de mon enfance, mais il y a tant de choses à dire que je ne sais pas où commencer... Il était une fois... il était une fois... » Il avait des problèmes d'allumage. J'ai plaqué ma main sur son front pour activer les fils électriques. « Allez vas-y, papa. » Alors il a psalmodié une énième prière au nom de Dieu Père et Miséricordieux, a répété « il était une fois », ça faisait donc déjà trois fois de suite, et n'a jamais commencé. Jamais rien dit. (26-27)

He didn't want me to grow up too soon, like he had, and miss my youth. One time, he made an effort to go there: he sat down at the table and he finally opened up to the first page of his life story. My eyes were fixed on his lips. He started off by praying to God and to the ancestors of our tribe. Then he started to rub his hands together as if he were about to start the ablutions before a prayer, "Well, if you insist, I will tell you some stories from my childhood, but there are so many things to say that I don't know where to start... Once upon a time...once upon a time..." He was having a hard time getting started. I placed my hand on his forehead as if to activate the spark, "Go ahead, Daddy." So, he prayed for the umpteenth time, in the name of Father and God the Merciful, and repeated, "Once upon a time..." That was the third time in a row, but he never started. Never said anything.

Having never spoken to his father about it explicitly, Azouz imagines that his father's youth was a challenging one and that he wanted to shield young Azouz from the hardships he had suffered.

Azouz recalls that when his father would make an attempt to open up and be vulnerable, he would turn to Allah and his ancestors for inspiration, invoking the notion that one relies on familial support in order to connect emotionally. Although Azouz's father had his son in front of him, seeking a bond with him, he turned to the past for help and was unable to deliver what his son wanted from him.

Like his father before him, Azouz struggles to tell his daughters much about his youth. As he imagines connecting with them, he turns to the past, and reimagines his own father and the blockades that prevented them from bridging the void that was between them. Although Azouz criticizes his father for not expressing himself more freely and feels melancholic at the idea of the wealth of untold stories, he is trapped by the same bondage of Algerian masculinity. Azouz seeks a different relationship with his daughters, but perpetuates the same behavior of non-intimacy and silence.

Azouz's daughters do not recognize the particularities of having grown up as he did to be integral to who he is. They have less access to their father's tribal model of family than they do to its counterpart, the nuclear one, for two reasons — first, their father does not share much about his childhood and understandings of tribal kinship with them and, second, they were raised in France, where the nuclear model is dominant. Therefore, the girls understand family as it would be defined by their mother (or, by France more generally) — made up of their mother, their father, and the two of them. Because of this vision of family, the divorce represents a fracturing of their family and a sense of finality for them. They criticize their father for his inability to cultivate a specific kind of intimate relationship with their mother (106-7), rather than seeking to understand why: “Quel père j'étais, pour ne plus aimer sa mère qu'elle aimait plus que tout au monde ? [...] J'ai dit : « Un père et un homme, c'est différent. »” (39), ‘What kind of father was

I, to not love her mother, who she loved more than anyone else in the world? [...] I said, “A father is different from a man.””

Zola cannot understand why her father would want to disrupt the nuclear family structure that she valued. She sees him as accountable to the nuclear family rather than to her or to her sister. He, on the contrary, views his responsibilities to his daughters as separate from his desire to divorce their mother. Instead of understanding his divorce as the death of his family, he feels the possibility of starting anew and finding an expression of intimacy he has been unable to cultivate thus far. However, even though Azouz begins to answer her truthfully in the passage above, he is haunted by previous notions of how to handle conflict and he quickly changes his mind. As he backpedals away from his honest answer, he misses an opportunity to connect with her and to work toward the alternate bond he desires to cultivate.

Another facet of Azouz’s Algerian masculinity is his need for emotion maintenance. In her article, “Maintaining Boundaries: Masculinizing Fatherhood and in the Feminine Province of Parenting,” sociologist Orlee Hauser explains that many of the respondents she interviewed for her study felt socially obligated to “manage emotions” (98) and that they were unable to imagine a model for fathering that included both masculinity and intimacy (86). Like the men in these studies, Azouz struggles to integrate his notions of the role of men with those of an intimate parent to arrive at a coherent identity as a father. He recalls understanding the cultural role of men in his “tribe” from an early age and having a strict understanding of what a man is obligated to do in his family. First, he must maintain emotional control by avoiding tears at all costs (108). Additionally, he must control the perception others have of him; in Azouz’s case, this means not allowing them to see him as “un père psycho-fragile” or ‘a mentally unstable father’ (139).

Above, his advice to his daughter that “quand on est dans le brouillard et qu’on n’y voit rien, il faut faire trois choses : serrer les dents, pleurer et aller de l’avant” (39) ‘When you’re in the thick of the fog and you can’t see anything, you have to do three things: grit your teeth, cry and move on,’ places emphasis on self-reliance in moments of crisis. Azouz advocates for coping or processing without the support of others. His masculinity requires that he deal with his crises on his own and without exposing his vulnerability or expressing his troubles to others. His need to handle emotional turmoil on his own inhibits him from cultivating intimate bonds via authentic expression of self. Time and time again in the novel, he turns away from his daughters and inward to himself. The process of emotion maintenance further embeds his lack of intimacy with his daughters and heightens his fear of intimacy moving forward.

Azouz uses generalizations about how Arab men deal with emotion and intimacy to explain how he got to where he currently is, but his experiences in France and in a marriage with a French woman have led him to develop Westernized goals of intimacy. Herein lies a great irony: despite the legacy of intimacy that has been handed down to him by his “tribe,” his ideal relationship with both his daughters and a hypothetical future spouse would more closely resemble the French cultural ideals for partnership and parental intimacy. He observes the gendered rules governing feelings among Arab men and understands how these rules produced his relationships, but seeks to alter the manner in which those rules influence him moving forward, so as not to continue the pattern of relating to people in that fashion. He understands very clearly that it is precisely his idea that masculinity precludes him from verbal tenderness that maintains the barrier between him and his daughters. Alone in his room in Ouessant, he practices how he will do things differently next time:

J’allais enfin dire à quelqu’une ces mots d’amour qui n’étaient jamais sortis de moi et qui s’étaient fossilisés. J’allais trouver le courage.

Face au miroir de la salle de bains, la nuit je m'étais essayé à des répliques d'acteur de cinéma *Je t'aime, je t'aime. Tu sais que je t'aime ? Le sais-tu ?* Cela me plaisait de prononcer ces mots. L'étirement qu'ils requéraient était agréable. Je savais qu'en espagnol on disait *te quiero*. Et en allemand, en anglais, en hollandais, en italien, je le savais aussi. Il ne manquait plus qu'elle, celle qui allait rafler la mise. Tout paraissait prêt. J'ai attendu. (137-38)

I was finally going to say those words that had never come out of my mouth before and that had basically fossilized. I would find the courage.

Facing the mirror in the bathroom, at night I would recite lines like a movie actor *I love you, I love you. Do you know that I love you? You know that?* It pleased me to say those words. The flexibility that saying them required was nice. I knew that in Spanish you say *te quiero*. And I knew how to say it in German, in English, in Dutch, and in Italian. All that was missing was her, the woman who would win the jackpot. Everything seemed ready. I waited.

Interestingly, he does not include Arabic or Kabyle³⁶ in the list of languages in which he is knows (rationally, at least) how to express love. The absence of Arabic and Kabyle on the list provokes two questions: does the narrator assume that his future wife will be of European descent and, therefore, will Arabic and/or Kabyle be useless in verbal intimacy? or, do Arabic and/or Kabyle language entail specific limitations because of the implied, inherited bondage they impose on Azouz? Either way, speaking words of verbal intimacy in the native tongues of his parents remains outside the scope of what he desires in a future partnership.

When Azouz shirks away from expressing fondness verbally, he both feminizes and juvenilizes words of affection and the intimacy/vulnerability of uttering them:

C'était vrai, j'évitais les mots d'amour. J'avais peur qu'ils m'enchaînent, m'entraînent trop loin et me lâchent en plein virage contre un platane. [...] Selon [Sofia], les oreilles des filles ont besoin d'entendre régulièrement des mots d'amour, sinon elles partent ailleurs chercher de la douceur. Ça marche comme ça, les filles. Et moi j'étais passé à côté de ce qu'elle semblait considérer comme l'essence même de la vie. (107)

It was true... I tended to avoid words of affection. I was afraid that they'd put me in chains, drag me really far away, and leave me there. [...] According to [Sofia], girls need to hear words of affection regularly or else they will leave to look for tenderness

³⁶ Language spoken by an estimated 5 million people in the north and northeast regions of Algeria. At other points in the text, Azouz alludes to speaking and/or understanding Kabyle.

elsewhere. That's how they work, girls. Me, I had passed up what she considered to be the essence of life.

Azouz's use of the word "filles" trivializes the notion that verbal sentiments are necessary in the maintenance of intimate bonds. His perception of "les mots d'amour" is a by-product of his need to keep his emotions in check more generally and to control the perception of others — he believes words will trap him in non-literal bondage, despite not presenting any indication that he knows this from experience. His daughters not only admonish him for not telling their mother he loved her when they were still together, they also attempt to cultivate verbal intimacy with him at several points in the text and he fails to meet them in that space. Therefore, a lack of verbal intimacy, produced by socially constructed notions of masculinity, becomes one of Azouz's largest obstacles in cultivating the relationships that he wants.

The tensions between the narrator's desire to find intimacy and his need to remain untouched by emotion are clearly visible in the text. He is impaired in his ability to connect with his daughters by the challenge of reconciling his desire to develop a parental bond with them and his culturally engrained notions of Algerian masculinity. Scholars who have conducted sociology and psychology studies on masculinity and intimacy in fatherhood across geographic regions and cultural contexts have largely concluded that, for many men, intimacy with one's children and masculinity can be oppositional, and are often difficult to negotiate. In her article, "Tensions Between Fatherhood and the Social Construction of Masculinity in Italy," Sveva Magaraggia shows that:

Some aspects of cultural models of masculinity can obstruct the process of building intimate relationships with young children because such relationships need to be grounded in precisely those aspects that dominant forms of masculinity repress: emotions, affectivity and physical closeness. (76)³⁷

³⁷ For another example of socio-historical research on the difficulty of reconciling masculinity and familial intimacy, see Laura King's *Family Men: Fatherhood & Masculinity in Britain, c. 1914-1960* (2015).

Azouz is paralyzed in the face of these models of masculinity and the result is that he rejects his daughters' gestures of intimacy.

For example, in one particular scene, Azouz reflects on how much his daughters mean to him and on what it means to take advantage of life. He resolves that he is going to change his behavior moving forward and express to his daughters how much they mean to him every day from that day forward. He is motivated in part by the notion that he has built up an emotional debt that he needs to repay and he wants to move past the fear he has developed of loving intensely. The scene is interrupted when Zola says, "On dirait que tu pleures" or, 'It looks like you're crying,' and he responds "Non, c'est la pluie" or 'No, it's just the rain," (24).

Azouz's emotion when he thinks of his daughters moves him to the point of tears, but when Zola asks if he is crying, he reverts back to the rules of masculinity that do not allow him to admit how he feels. Azouz feels certain that in the future he will express his love for his daughters more freely and decides that not fearing love constitutes the meaning of life. However, when the opportunity to have an intimate moment presents itself, and Zola asks if he is crying, he lies. He claims that he "defended" himself against the accusation of tears, as if her question regarding his tears were an attack. The bondage of masculinity prevents him from connecting with her.

Azouz's lack of intimate relationships, produced by the isolation he experiences in his Algerian masculinity, results in fear, stress and paranoia. A cycle begins in which his paranoia and fear exacerbate the bondage of his intersectional identity. At one point, the stress caused by his bondage makes him physically sick and he has no choice but to alter his behavior dramatically: "Après la visite administrative, j'ai contracté un ulcère à l'estomac. [...] Dans la salle de bains, à chaque fois que je m'approchais du lavabo, je vomissais. C'est aussi à cette

période que mes troubles du sommeil ont démarré,” (87) ‘After the social worker left, I got a stomach ulcer. [...] In the bathroom, each time I came close to the sink, I would vomit. It was also at that point that I started having trouble sleeping.’

Family studies scholars who examine the impact of divorce simultaneously normalize Azouz’s behavior by describing how common it is, and admonish it for the negative consequences it can have in developing new family dynamics (Emery 375). Azouz is unhappy with the new kinship structure that has been presented to him by French government officials, but because he walks on eggshells (87), he pushes his daughters away and keeps them in the non-intimate sphere of his life. His actions in the face of his predicament have the opposite of their desired effect.

Azouz’s paranoia produces a paralyzing fear of fighting with his daughters, which only pushes them further away and more deeply entrenches him in his isolation. His daughters express on multiple occasions that they would have preferred to spend their vacation time with their father in Algeria, getting to know a piece of him and of themselves. Their desire to connect with North Africa can be read as a gesture of intimacy and a desire to understand their father through his ancestral lands. However, Azouz’s fears lead him to imagine the worst-case scenarios if he were to acquiesce, take them to Algeria, and try to cultivate an intimate relationship. When Sofia expresses out loud that she would have preferred going there, Azouz tells himself that they would have gotten bored quickly inside his father’s house. He believes that his daughters are too dependent on air-conditioning, running water, and television to have enjoyed a trip to Algeria and that the three would inevitably ended up arguing (9). His decision not to take them to Algeria is based on a fear that any attempt to create a space of intimacy could only be met with failure. He does not share any of his real thoughts on the matter with them, thereby unintentionally

maintaining the barriers that exist between them. He does not trust that their relationship could or would move past a disagreement and, therefore, he refuses to take them to Algeria.

His fear of intimacy causes him to reject gestures of intimacy from his daughters at least two other times in the novel. In one instance, Zola asks him what he is thinking about and he responds, tenderly, that he is thinking of her. When pressed further on the issue, he dodges away from letting her in on his thoughts and changes the subject, telling her that he was wondering where the guest house they are renting is located (31). On a second occasion, Zola reaches out to him with an affectionate term of endearment and he notices the energy with which she expresses it: “« Allez, on y va, papa ? » a dit Zola, piaffant. C’était la première fois qu’elle m’appelait « papa » avec autant d’emphase” (145) ‘ — Come on, shall we go daddy?’ said Zola, prancing. That was the first time she had called me “daddy” with so much emphasis.’ Azouz does not validate her choice of terms or tell her it meant something to him; instead, he shies away from her gesture of intimacy.

At times, Azouz adopts a fatalistic view of his relationship with his daughters and the handicap that his masculinity has left him with. He internalizes that his state of bondage is permanent and allows the traumas of the process of divorce to haunt his perception of the state of his relationships in the literary present. In the following passage, he even casts himself as an emotional martyr all the while gendering his role as an un-intimate one:

Je bavais. La colère ne me lâchait pas la gorge. On me traitait comme un pneu de cycle, la dernière roue de carrosse. J’étais devenu un distributeur de pensions alimentaires et compensatoires. Je devais me satisfaire de cette fonction. Point barre. Un père, ça tient debout, ça balise le chemin des autres, ça informe ceux qui suivent des dégâts de la navigation à vie, des récifs, des écueils et autres brisants. (122-23)

I was babbling. My anger held me by the throat. They treated me like a bicycle tire, the last wheel on a carriage. I had become a child support and alimony dispensary. I had to find a way to be satisfied with that role. Period. A father’s role is to stand up straight, show others the way, warn others who are trying to navigate their lives of the dangers ahead, of the reefs, of the sand bars and of other hazardous areas.

Azouz wants to accept his fatherly lot, but only because finding satisfaction in his circumstances is a masculine obligation. He sees being a symbol of strength as part of the pressure imposed by socially constructed notions of masculine obligation in one's role as a father. The need to be strong and, therefore, masculine overrides his needs for an emotional connection with his daughters.

Although the genesis of Azouz's isolation is in his childhood, it is maintained in the narrative present by his continued perceptions of his outsidership. Azouz's internalized status as outsider and his position as the male child of Algerian immigrants has marked him, and that marking haunts him in his efforts to negotiate new relationships with his daughters. Due to his precarious intersectional experience, Azouz feels *saudade* for a different past, a different present, and a different future than the one he imagines is in store for him.

***Saudade* —A Source of Bondage that Destabilizes Past and Present**

As Azouz examines the state of his relationship with his daughters in the literary present, he reaches the conclusion that he is not the father he wishes he were, and he blames a variety of factors around him for what he has become. The blame he casts, both on himself and on others, constitutes a second form of bondage. It allows the past to haunt him, prevents him from resolving previous issues, and holds him in a state of non-intimacy with his daughters. Put differently, it keeps his past anxieties alive and central to his interactions in the narrative present. As memories from his past resurface, the blame he casts perpetuates the mental process that prevents him from finding the relationships he desires in the moment.

The first person he blames is himself; through his self-blame, or regret, he continually punishes himself for decisions that he made and cannot undo. In this way, a previous version of

Azouz haunts him even while he is on vacation. Two other recipients of his criticism or accusations include other characters who are less central to the plot of the novel: his father and his former wife. As he reflects on the manner in which each of them has influenced him and had an impact on his views of intimacy and fatherhood, blame holds him paralyzed in a state of limbo where he cannot move past the dissatisfaction he feels in order to change his circumstances — in his paralysis, he feels deep, melancholic *saudade* for both the memories that haunt him and the future he desires. Therefore, the bonds he hopes to share with his daughters remain in jeopardy as he allows himself to be transported out of the moment by the bondage of blame.

While Azouz's paralysis and bondage produce *saudade*, the *saudade* he feels also has the potential to be the site at which he develops new bonds. In both the narrator's childhood past and literary present, *saudade* helps him find commonalities with other characters. In this way, while the hauntings produced by the bondage of blame may erode the possibility of intimate spaces with certain individuals, they open up the possibility of understanding between strangers. In what follows, we will see how blame haunts the narrator to create bondage for him, producing *saudade*, but also how *saudade* allows him to relate to others.

Perhaps the most poignant site of the narrator's self-blame, or regret, is the series of decisions that led him to lose half-custody of his daughters during the divorce from his former wife. As he reflects on the interview-process with a social worker, he experiences a fracturing of the self, in which part of him wishes he could redo the interview while on his best behavior so as not to lose half-custody, and the other part of him is so angry with the outcome he wishes he could go back in time and insult the social worker who interviewed him (85-86). He blames the social worker, himself, and the divorce process in general for his current predicament because he

realizes that if he had been granted half-custody, less would be at stake during this weeklong vacation — he would not feel that his time and window of opportunity for creating the alternate bonds he seeks with his daughters was so limited.

In other examples, such as when he asks himself questions, he experiences a blurring of fear and self-blame. When he and his daughters disembark from the *Fromveur*³⁸ and get inside a taxi, he thinks, “Qu’étais-je venu faire ici ?” (72) or ‘What did I come here for?’ He does not want a future version of himself to regret this vacation and this attempt to connect with his daughters. These rhetorical questions highlight the manner in which he fears additional sites of self-blame and bondage. They pop up on several occasions as the narrator muses about the mistakes he has made and about whether or not a future version of himself will acknowledge that this attempt at connecting with his daughters was one of them.

As he and his daughters travel to the house they have rented, his future self criticizes him for being ill-prepared for what lies ahead and he wonders if they should all return to the ferry. He projects his regret regarding the predicament of his current situation onto the taxi driver who is taking them out to the house they have rented and imagines that the driver feels sorry for them (75-76). The narrator imagines that the residence is haunted, literally, to illustrate a hypothetical vacation with his daughters that would be unacceptable. He does not consciously think of the memories that accompany him as metaphorical ghosts or imagine that they have destructive potential. While he and his girls all feel that the rental home has an eerie feeling, mostly due to the fact that it is not occupied most of the time, they do not go on to conclude that it is, in fact, haunted. Instead, the narrator is the one who is haunted by decisions that he made in the past by the previous version of himself that made them. His doubt about whether or not he made the

³⁸ Name given to the ferry that transported them from mainland France out to Ouessant.

correct decision in choosing this particular spot for his vacation with his daughters remains present during their stay on the island.

Azouz's experiences are similar to what Kyra Giorgi has described as a "homesickness" (13) that can produce "fatalistic feelings [that] are often incredibly isolating" (15). His homesickness allows us to see his desire for something different and for what could have been rather than what is. Midway through the vacation, the protagonist's regret has only grown, and the bondage of the doubt he feels threatens to terminate the vacation, as he considers leaving the island (127). Up to this point, the possibility of taking the girls to Algeria had not seemed like a valid option. Instead, the protagonist had imagined that Algeria would only have torn him and his daughters further apart and Ouessant was substituted as a better option for the vacation. However, because things are going poorly midweek, the narrator questions himself and begins to ask himself whether or not they would have been better off in Algeria. He emphasizes that he is unable to let go of the speculation of what could have or would have happened if he had made a different decision about what was best for this trip. Although it is too late to return to the past and take his daughters to Algeria, the idea of what might have been haunts him.

Azouz blames his father for not having been a better role-model for him in how to balance being a traditionally masculine father with having an intimate relationship. As we saw previously, inherited notions of masculinity are detrimental to Azouz's relationship with his daughters, and when he ponders the notions of masculinity he inherited, his father becomes the scapegoat for his situation. In the literary present, the protagonist's father is dead and the possibility of change in their relationship is closed off. However, when Azouz revisits memories of his father, he is filled with both a melancholia or a *saudade* for a connection with him and a desire to reproach him for his challenges in the narrative present (26-27).

His criticism of his father's non-intimacy with people extends itself past his role as a father and into his perception of how his father behaved as a partner. He holds his father accountable for modeling a non-intimate relationship with his mother, and for the manner in which he believes that model has been ingrained in him. In the middle of a conversation with the girls, his train of thought reminds him of his inability to utter affectionate words, which in turn takes him back to reflecting on how he inherited many of the insufficiencies he perceives in himself from his father: "J'ai repensé à Louise Batesti à qui j'avais dédié tant de poèmes, mais à qui je n'avais jamais dit un mot d'amour. Et puis je n'avais jamais vu mon père embrasser ma mère de toute ma vie. Je ne l'avais jamais vu lui tenir la main, même après la mort de Malik" (107-08), 'I thought about Louise Batesti, to whom I had dedicated so many poems, but to whom I had never uttered any words of affection. And I had never see my father hug or kiss my mother in my whole life. I had never seen him hold her hand, even after Malik died.' Azouz sees irony in the imbalance between his feelings for Louise and his ability to verbalize them. He cites the absence of physical affection between his parents as an explanation for his challenges in expressing affection and, interestingly, his father becomes the reason for the void. Azouz does not describe a scene in which he notes his father rejecting his mother's affection or his mother's complaints about the lack of tenderness between them, yet he blames the absence of physical tenderness between his parents solely on his father. He implies that a desire for physical boundaries could not have come from his mother.

While he feels that his father is to blame for his struggles in finding an intimate relationship with his former wife, he also blames his former wife for his lack of autonomy in their relationship. He believes that she stifled him and his voice in the early phases of their relationship (20-21). Because love was a topic that was off-limits in his family, the narrator felt

inexperienced when he embarked on a relationship and a marriage with his daughters' mother. His inexperience led him to keep quiet and her to take control of decisions they made, which made him feel trapped. As he reflects on how things happened, he makes connections between his observations of his parents' relationship in his adolescence and his previous relationship with his former wife. However, she is not blameless, because she failed to facilitate his sense of autonomy in their dating life and marriage.

Azouz's former wife remains central to his blame in the literary present because he believes she caused a mess in their divorce. When they split, she made her control of the process explicit and did not allow him to have a say in how the negotiation process would take place. Because they were all living in France at the time of the separation, she benefited from the French institutional forces that backed her up. The protagonist's preference for verbal negotiation in lieu of a legal contract was squashed by both her and by the French legal system:

Lors de mon divorce, j'avais tenté d'exprimer cet héritage culturel à ma compagne pour éviter l'engrenage de la justice et de ses palais, de ses chambres spécialisées, de ses couloirs et de ses auditions. Nous allions nous déchirer sur les barbelés de cette institution. Je lui jurais sur mes ancêtres que je n'abandonnerais jamais mes enfants tout au long de leur vie, c'étaient mes deux seuls amours au monde, comment pourrais-je avoir l'idée de les renier, cette suspicion était déjà une telle offense, je la suppliais de renoncer aux avocats, ne devrions-nous pas donner le peu d'argent dont nous disposions à nos deux petits trésors plutôt qu'aux robes noires qui font tourner l'engrenage ? (37)

During my divorce, I had attempted to explain my cultural heritage to my spouse in order to avoid the gears of the justice system, its palaces, its specialized rooms, its hallways and its hearings. We were going to get torn on the metaphorical barbed wire of this institution. I swore on my ancestors to her that I would never abandon my children, never during their lives; they were my only two loves in the world... How could I ever think of denying them anything? The very notion of it was offensive. I begged her to give up the lawyers. Shouldn't we give the little bit of money we had to our two treasures instead of to these black robes that were meddling in our business?

Azouz returns to the notion of cultural heritage and misunderstandings between cultures to invoke legacy and inheritance in his worldview. When Azouz gives his word, he swears on his ancestors, drawing on the heritage that came before him and model set by his father. Azouz

believes his former wife is the reason that the divorce went badly. In the narrative present, as he attempts to find a new balance in his relationship with the girls, his former wife's choices continue to haunt his ability to relate to his daughters.

Finally, Azouz blames the mother of his daughters for her ghostly presence in their consciousness as he tries to relate to them without or beyond her. Put differently, the memory of her ghost remains present in her absence from their family dynamic, and Azouz is left to deal with the challenges her absence presents. Now that he is no longer married to her, he feels he is forced to compete with her. His daughters talk about her a lot and he wants to spend time with them without feeling her, or the ghost of her previous role, in their new formation as a "trio familial" (77). The girls have lots of questions for their dad about his decision to split from their mother. (Azouz never verbalizes whether or not the decision was entirely his, but his daughters have internalized that it was.) They revisit the topic too many times for his liking and he attempts to exercise emotional control by not expressing his exasperation with the subject. The vacation to Ouessant was intended to move past a familial relationship defined by its nuclearity and to find an alternate method for envisioning bonds in his role as a father. However, the absence of the girls' mother, when they are used to having her around, creates a haunting presence by which she remains with them.

Her ghostly presence indirectly surveils his interactions with his daughters because he knows that they will report everything back to her. Specifically, he is afraid he will come across look like "un père psycho-fragile" (139), or 'a nutcase dad' and that his former wife will get social workers re-involved in their family dynamic. The threat of her interference on his future rights with his daughters and the trauma of court interference in the past loom over the vacation and have tangible effects on his actions. While it was the authoritative, omnipresent, French

family affairs lawyers who were ultimately responsible for his loss of custody, his former wife is the one who invited their presence into the family. Additionally, she continues to interface with his daughters and could continue chipping away at his time with them. Therefore, he projects the painful memories and associations he has with the social worker and with the lawyers primarily onto his former wife. The possibility that these individuals could take his daughters away from him turns them into ghostly presences during his vacation, a time when he should be focused on bonding with his daughters. In this way, his trepidations about what his wife and the French legal system could do to him and his relationships represents the bondage created by blame.

Azouz believes that his daughters hold a grudge against him for his inability to form a particular kind of relationship. He resents both his former wife and his parents for being the source of those short-comings and for (in)advertently instilling those grudges in his daughters. His inexperience talking about love as a child and his troubles with his former wife haunt his ability to connect with his daughters. Thus, his previous relationships and short-comings in them continue to affect his goals. The lack of conversation about love during his childhood becomes a sort of double-haunting as it appears on two levels: in the recent past with his former wife and in the literary present with his daughters (112). His perception that he lacked control over his relationship with his former wife remains present as he attempts to negotiate his role as a father for his daughters.

Despite his efforts to get to know them better, Azouz imagines lack of connection to his daughters as an inevitability. He experiences his efforts to draw them nearer to him as fruitless due to the bondage that holds him in the past and to the *saudade* his bondage produces. In one particular passage, he describes reaching out to his ancestors for divine inspiration as to how to handle his situation. Subsequently, he exposes the relationship between their lack of response

and the *saudade* that follows. Just as he is about to give up and resign himself to the permanence of his situation, he experiences a fleeting moment of hope:

Le *dad* aurait bien envoyé une bouteille à la mer en direction du ciel criblé de mégots et crié aux ancêtres qui passent leur temps à jouer aux dominos : « Hohé, excusez-moi de vous déranger, mais l'un d'entre vous aurait-il pitié d'un descendant qui cherche un remontant ? »

Le *dad* l'a fait. Comme la *saudade* des chanteurs du vieux Lisboa. Il est allé chercher dans ses tripes une prière, la plus sincère, mais pas un ancêtre n'a levé un cil. Leurs regards ne quittaient pas les carrés de dominos. J'ai laissé passer quelques secondes pour qu'ils puissent réagir, quand brusquement je l'ai vue glisser, merveilleuse, une incroyable étoile filante, au moment où j'allais me jeter du haut d'un phare, enfin un signe m'apparaissait, une missive de la Voie lactée. C'en était fini de ma *saudade*, du besoin de consolation impossible à apaiser. (123-24)

The *dad* should have sent a message in a bottle out into the ocean...towards that sky littered with cigarette butts...and cried out to his ancestors who passed their time up there playing dominos, "Hey, hey! Excuse me for bothering you, but would one of you take pity on your descendant who is looking to pick himself back up?"

The *dad* did it. Like the *saudade* expressed by the singers of old Lisbon. He went searching in his heart and soul for a prayer, the sincerest of prayers, but his ancestors didn't lift their gaze. Their eyes didn't leave the domino pieces. I let a few seconds pass so that they could respond, when all of a sudden, I saw a marvelous shooting star glide by, right at the moment that I was going to jump off of the lighthouse. Finally, the sign that I had been looking for appeared, sent by the Milky Way. That was the end of my *saudade*, of my insatiable need for consolation.

In the passage, Azouz refers to himself as "le *dad*," adopting the informal English and invoking the paternal role to which he aspires; he wants to be a specific kind of father, a *dad*. In order to achieve his goal, he hopes to transform the hauntological bondage he feels into bonds with the ghosts who make up his ancestry. Although they the source of what he perceives to be his problems, he hopes they will be able to offer solutions.

Initially, Azouz is preoccupied with his helplessness in the face of his dilemma and with the bondage that is the blame he casts on others for his situation. The passage takes a turn as a well-timed celestial event answers his call and gives him hope. His *saudade* causes him to turn to the sky and find a connection to his ancestors in a shooting star as well as to find bonds with the people who surround him physically. Those bonds with individuals, that are produced by a

shared experience of *saudade*, exist both in his childhood past and in the literary present. In Azouz's childhood, *saudade* is presented as a force that binds "outsiders" in France,³⁹ and specifically, as a force that helps him to develop a bond with Yvon. In what follows, I show how *saudade* becomes the source of the bond of friendship between the protagonist and Yvon, as well as how the narrator continues to feel bound to Yvon, via *saudade*, even after their friendship ends.

Yvon's experiences with *saudade* are different from the protagonist's. However, like Azouz, he feels he toes the insider/outsider line in Lyon. His perception of his insider/outsiderness highlights the constructed nature of national identity as a mechanism for belonging. If Azouz's membership in the fraternity provided by national identity is questionable because of his parents' distinct Algerian national identity at their birth, then Yvon's lack of membership destabilizes any argument that national identity is a mechanism through which one finds inclusion. His family's nationality would have been French for generations, yet he feels external to the "imagined community" that national identity is supposed to provide (Anderson 7). (The duchy of Brittany became a province of the Kingdom of France in 1532; however, it retains its cultural distinctiveness, including a distinct Breton language, to this day.) Yvon's perception of his own outsidership in Lyon highlights the extent to which insider/outsider dichotomies are relative to positionality and individual perception. According to Yvon, his home, Ouessant, is entirely different from Lyon, and it might as well be on the opposite side of the world.

When Yvon describes Ouessant, or thinks of it, his memories spark an emotional response in him that can only be described as deep, bittersweet nostalgia or *saudade*. As Azouz observes Yvon's emotional reaction, he pulls a memory from his own mental rolodex and creates

³⁹ For the narrator's understanding of who is considered an "outsider" see pages 75-76.

a connection between Yvon's excited nostalgia and his family's reaction upon spotting Algerian soil. Because Azouz makes this connection, the boys share a mutual understanding located in the *saudade* they experience, and the pair become friends that are bound together in their *saudade* for something other than the present moment. In the following scene, Yvon spots Ouessant on a map and shares his thoughts with the narrator:

Un soir, nous étions dans sa cuisine éclairée par un néon qui faisait flotter nos silhouettes sur les murs sales et gras et, tout en préparant de la pâte à crêpes, on parlait d'ici et de là-bas. À un moment donné, il a dit :

« C'est là. »

On aurait dit qu'il était la vigie d'une goélette et qu'il criait « Terre ! Terre ! » exactement comme la première fois qu'on a hurlé ces mots sur le pont du *Ville-de-Marseille*.⁴⁰ Son doigt a largué l'ancre sur le bleu glacé de la carte Michelin agrafée au mur. Il s'est tu. Ses yeux se sont envolés. Une petite brise s'est levée et a ridé la surface de la carte. Je l'observais de biais. Je les voyais, les gouttes de nostalgie qui roulaient sur ses cils. Les mêmes que les miennes lorsque j'arrivais à Sétif⁴¹ dans le train de mon enfance. J'étais bloqué devant la tristesse que j'avais réveillée en lui. (56)

One evening, we were in his kitchen under a fluorescent lamp that cast our shadows against the dirty, greasy walls. We were making batter for crêpes and talking about here versus there. All of a sudden, he said, "It's there."

You would have said that he was the lookout at the front of the schooner and that he was yelling, "Land! Land!" just like the first time we had yelled those words on the bridge of the *Ville-de-Marseille*. His finger landed in the middle of the blue on the Michelin map that was hanging from his wall. He stopped talking. His eyes swelled. A small breeze came in through the window and lifted the edge of the map. I was watching from an angle. I saw them, the drops of nostalgia, as they rolled over his eyelashes. The same ones as the ones I had when I arrived in Sétif by train during my childhood. I was stunned in the face of the sadness I had provoked in him.

Yvon experiences the longing pangs of the immigration experiences and he misses his homeland despite never having officially crossed any national borders. For him, Lyon feels like it's a lifetime away from home, and he misses Ouessant so deeply that the narrator sees his own experience in Yvon.

⁴⁰ Name of one of the two boats that took the narrator and his family to and from Algeria during his adolescence.

⁴¹ City in the Northwest region of Algeria known for a set of riots that occurred on May 8th of 1945 (which set off a set of events that eventually led to the Algerian War for Independence).

The emotional bond and friendship between Azouz and Yvon, sparked by their respective *saudades* for home, extends past the protagonist and creates a second bond between Yvon and Azouz's parents. The number of positive experiences that the narrator's family has had with white French people in Lyon is limited, and their interactions with Yvon represent an exception to the pattern of behavior they have come to expect from the French. Yvon spends a lot of time in the protagonist's home getting to know the family, and they look to the narrator for an explanation as to why Yvon is different from the other French individuals with whom they have had encounters:

Il était l'un des nôtres.

Un jour, mon père m'a demandé avec regret : « Pourquoi les Français ils sont pas tous comme lui ? »⁴² Ils n'auraient pas fait la guerre et massacré sa famille à Sétif au printemps 1945.⁴³ J'ai dit que les Bretons étaient un peuple à part. Des immigrés comme nous. Il a fait : « Ah, ci bour ça ! » Et sa tête a basculé un long moment dans la méditation. (62)

He was one of us.

One day, my father asked me, regretfully, "Why aren't all French people like him?" If they were all like him, they wouldn't have waged war and massacred his family in Sétif in the spring of 1945. I replied that the Bretons are a separate group. Immigrants like us. He said, "Oh, that explains it!" And his head nodded for a long while as he thought it over.

The protagonist and his family feel as though the immigrant experience, or the experience of straddling the line between insider and outsider, is universal enough to explain the bond that Yvon forms with the narrator and his family. Technically speaking, Yvon is not an immigrant, but Azouz relies on the category of "immigrant" in order to explain Yvon's *saudade*. He and his parents do not have any other framework through which they can build an understanding of

⁴² The narrator's father's speech is marked throughout the text by his (mis)pronunciation of certain words. All changes in spelling and/or grammar are made intentionally by the author.

⁴³ Reference to the events of May 8th, 1945 in Sétif, Algeria. On that day, WWII formally ended in Europe and the people of Sétif protested French occupation of Algeria, resulting in the death of between 2,000 and 4,000 Algerians. These events are often considered by historians to mark the turning-point in Franco-Algerian relations, eventually leading to the Algerian War for Independence (Morgan 17).

Yvon. It is through their shared understanding that they form a unique alternate kinship structure, which allows Yvon to become “l’un des nôtres” or ‘one of us.’

In the literary present, Yvon remains present in his absence, haunting not only Azouz’s consciousness, but also the protagonist’s relationship with his daughters. Yvon left without saying goodbye and, when he did, he created a new space of *saudade* in the narrator’s life. The lack of closure he left behind him meant that Azouz was unable to grieve the friendship he lost. The two boys had formed a friendship that was their own version of alternate family, so when Yvon disappeared, he left a hole behind in his wake and inspired new sites of nostalgia and *saudade*:

Nous avons grandi et je savais bien que le temps transformait les gens. On ne pourrait pas rester des calots éternels. Hélas, un jour vint la triste nouvelle. Une crevasse. Une absence. Yvon disparut. Aussi vite et mystérieusement qu’il était entré dans ma vie. [...] Je me suis senti troué de toutes parts. L’ami m’avait fait partager tant de choses, il était parti sans un mot. Je lui en voulais à mort. Je lui pardonnais à vie. Il ne savait pas dire *salamalec*⁴⁴ et *kenavo* au moment du départ. S’effacer : il avait fait fort. (63)

We had grown up and I knew well that time changes people. We couldn’t stay best pals forever. Sadly, one day, I got the bad news. A fissure. An absence. Yvon disappeared. As quickly and mysteriously as he had entered into my life. [...] I felt like something was missing. My friend with whom I had shared so much had left without saying a word. I resented him, wishing he was dead. But I forgave him, hoping he had found life. He didn’t know how to say *salamalec* or *kenavo*⁴⁵ when the time to go arrived. Instead, he erased himself.

Because Yvon disappeared without saying goodbye, he left the protagonist looking for him and wondering if he’d see him again. Azouz has not seen Yvon since he left without saying goodbye, but Yvon remains in his thoughts and he shapes the narrator’s ability to connect with his daughters. Yvon saw Azouz in his space of *saudade* and acknowledged that Azouz wanted to be

⁴⁴ Shorted version of *Salam oua rlikoum* (the author’s transliteration) on the first page of this chapter.

⁴⁵ Arabic and Breton for goodbye or farewell, respectively.

seen as “lyonnais” rather than as an outsider due to his ancestry. He became like a brother to Azouz and made it challenging for Azouz to find closure once he left.

The protagonist assumes that because he was able to form this bond of alternate kinship with Yvon, facilitated by *saudade*, that the same will apply to other inhabitants of Ouessant. He has evidence that at one point the sensation of outsidership or of being in the minority provided him with a space for the creation of bonds, so he draws conclusions about how he will relate to other Bretons when he and his daughters arrive on the island (32). He compares the people of Ouessant to the people of his “tribe” and points out that both groups are the descendants of nomads (though it remains unclear what evidence he has that Bretons are nomads). He argues that there is no reason to be scared of forming bonds of alternate kinship with these people because of their common historical background. Because they are also nomads, he thinks, they share common ground with him and they are like his childhood friend, Yvon. He projects Yvon’s *saudade* on to the entire region and imagines that they will share a bond with him, like Yvon before them.

Yvon’s ghostly presence in Azouz’s new family of three is palpable enough that it is the impetus in his decision to travel to Ouessant with the girls in the first place. During the vacation, his daughters feel the haunting presence of Yvon’s ghost and ask Azouz why he chose to bring them to Ouessant in the first place. In a scene that produces a conflict, the narrator confesses that Yvon influenced his choice of vacation spot; his choice of location was not in order to please his daughters or to best connect with them (41-42). Azouz explains that, when they were boys, Yvon saved his life by stepping in during a fight and displaying humanity in response to the perception of Azouz’s outsidership.

The extent to which the memory of Yvon effects the narrator becomes apparent later in the text. Azouz reveals that he knows Yvon continues to haunt his thoughts, and he states as much explicitly. He recalls feeling captivated by Yvon's stories of Ouessant during their childhood, and he references the Homeric classic, *The Odyssey*,⁴⁶ to describe the effect of Yvon's words on him — they pull him towards Ouessant without his consent and his desire to go towards the island feels outside of his control: “Viens dans mon île, viens, me susurraient des sirènes de grand chemin. Je n'avais pas de boules de cire dans les oreilles. Je n'étais ligoté à aucun mât. Je me tenais prêt à plonger,” (69) ‘Come to my island...come... the sirens whispered to me. I didn't have wax ear plugs in my ears. I wasn't tied down to anything. I was ready to jump.’ In the literary present, Yvon's words continue to haunt the narrator. The effect is as if Yvon were still inviting him to Ouessant or reaching into the Azouz's feelings of *saudade* in order to draw him to the island. The narrator is there with his daughters on vacation at least partly because he is not able to resist the call any longer.

The narrator's ruminations about Yvon go beyond their shared memories and the role Yvon played in his life during his childhood — he also feels a curiosity about where Yvon is and what he is doing in the literary present. In this way, *saudade* moves again into a gray area, where the boundaries of what is bond and what is mental bondage become unclear:

Dans le lit, je ne trouvais aucune position confortable pour me délester de mes pensées. Une armée d'ombres en a profité pour forcer ma rade. Yvon Le Guen était parmi elles. Où se trouvait-il en ce moment ? Avait-il planté de nouvelles racines aux antipodes ? Dans mon rêve, je parlais avec lui, avec des mots d'une langue inconnue, et cette conversation a occupé mon esprit contre les tentatives d'intrusion de Malik. [...] (109)

In my bed, I couldn't find a comfortable enough position to help me get rid of my thoughts. An army of shadows snuck in to my consciousness. Yvon Le Guen was among

⁴⁶ In Book 12 of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus plugs the ears of his sailors with beeswax and instructs them to tie him to the mast of their ship. The beeswax is to prevent the men from succumbing to the seductive songs of sirens, who would call the men into the rocky shores of an island, where they would surely crash and drown. Odysseus prefers to be tied to the mast because he wants to hear the songs.

them. Where was he at this moment? Had he put down roots in some other faraway place? In my dream, I spoke with him, in a strange language, and that conversation kept my thoughts so occupied that Malik was not able to intrude. [...]

Azouz still feels an emotional bond, via their shared friendship in adolescence, with Yvon.

Nonetheless, during his vacation, he is unable to focus on developing the relationship bonds he desires with his daughters because he is plagued by the bondage of his curiosity. Azouz finds himself unable to sleep at night and the ghosts in his life, Yvon and Malik, compete for his attention in his dreams.

Conclusion

The ending to Begag's novel presents Azouz with a brand-new, fleeting bond, made possible by *saudade*. As Azouz and his daughters wrap up their time on Ouessant, all three are thankful that the vacation has come to an end, disasters have been avoided, and they are headed back to Lyon. On their way back to the ferry, they take their rental bikes back to the shop and have one last interaction with Le Bihan. Le Bihan, who had previously been very concerned with Azouz's belonging pushes the issue of where Azouz was from "before" again. In a heartfelt scene, that means much more to Le Bihan than to Azouz, Azouz tells Le Bihan that his parents were from Algeria and the characters and reader alike discover that Le Bihan also suffers from a bondage of *saudade*:

On est sur un même bateau, moi le *Ville-de-Marseille* et lui le *Ville-d'Alger*. Moi d'ici, lui de là-bas. Il ferme les yeux. Moi aussi. [...]

Le Bihan déglutit. Il laisse fuiter son regard à droite, puis à gauche, enfin vers le sol, la terre.

Algérie : le mot l'a percuté. Sa tête ne tient plus sur le cou. Ses lèvres ont séché. Il soupire :

« J'ai tout de suite vu que vous étiez de là-bas. » (163-66)

We are on the same boat; mine is called the *Ville-de-Marseille*, and his, the *Ville-d'Alger*. I'm from here, he's from there. He closes his eyes. Me too. [...]

Le Bihan swallows. He lets his gaze fall to the right, then to the left, and finally to the ground, onto the earth.

Algeria: the word had crashed into him. His head hangs heavy on his neck. His lips dried up. He whispers, “I knew immediately you were from there.”

Azouz recognizes that Le Bihan is a *pied-noir*,⁴⁷ who was forced to leave Algeria and move back to France sometime during the Algerian War for Independence.

Le Bihan gets swept up in the connection he feels to Azouz, who is barely an acquaintance, thanks to their shared ties to a homeland neither of them is experiencing in the literary present. Azouz, who does not relate to Algeria in the same way, is patient with Le Bihan and allows himself to develop a moment of intimacy with this man, wherein Le Bihan uses Azouz to transport himself back in time to the place that perpetuates a state of *saudade* in him. As Azouz listens to his story, he learns that Le Bihan feels exiled from his roots and that he came to Ouessant in search of something, much like Azouz. The pair is able to bond due to their similar experiences making sense of their lives at the intersection between France and Algeria and struggling with the masculinity that impedes them from sharing it. When Azouz departs, Le Bihan says goodbye with, “« Adieu, frère. » Il dit on se reverra inch’Allah. C’est son vœu” (180). Azouz has become family to Le Bihan, occupying the role of brother, because of a narrative he has invented about Azouz and his nostalgia for Algeria.

This moment opens up a possibility for Azouz and his daughters. While Azouz is talking to Le Bihan, they are panicking because they fear they will miss the ferry and get stuck in Ouessant an additional night. Their voices, calling their father back into the moment, interrupt his conversation with the bike shop owner over and over again. When the trio does finally make

⁴⁷ Individuals of European ancestry who lived in Algeria during the French rule from 1830 to 1962. See Amy L. Hubbell’s *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile*.

it onto the boat and it pulls away from the island, Azouz finally finds the voice to express the intimacy he feels towards his daughters and seeks to lay bare in front of them:

Zola tempête.
Je lui dis : « Je t'aime. »
Elle dit : « Quoi ?
-- Je t'aime. »
Et là, elle ne sait pas quoi dire. Pour une fois, elle reste sans voix.
Sa sœur la regarde et verse une larme. Je lui dis que je l'aime aussi. Et puis après je leur dis à toutes le deux :
« Vous êtes mon île au trésor. Ce que j'ai de plus cher au monde. »
Alors elles se lèvent en même temps et on se serre les uns contre les autres, on fait un petit trépied familial qui résiste au vent mauvais. On se tient chaud.
Ensemble. (181)

Zola is in a mood. I tell her, "I love you."
She says, "What?"
"I love you."
And then, she doesn't know what to say. For the first time, she is speechless.
Her sister looks at her and sheds a tear. I tell her I love her too. And then I say to both of them, "You are my treasure island. The thing that's most important to me in the world."
They stand up at the same time and we hold each other, making a little family tripod that resists the stormy winds around us. We keep each other warm. Together.

Azouz tells his girls he loves them, and then meet him in his vulnerability and space of intimacy with warmth and support. In this way, Begag rewrites the ups and downs of the vacation, the tensions between father and daughters, and the island of Ouessant. In the end, maybe Azouz found what he came looking for. He used the island to wrestle with the conflict produced by varying definitions of family and leaves it with the family he desired to create for himself.

Chapter Three

Surrogacy: Temporary Familial Bonds and the Bondage of Origins

It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence*⁴⁸ of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely “rupture” the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence. By “partial” I mean both “incomplete” and “virtual.”

-- Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

The roman d'apprentissage or Bildungsroman is a classic genre prevalent in many languages, cultural settings, and periods. The term was initially coined to refer to a predominantly Western sub-genre of novels in which the protagonist “comes of age” or discovers the solution to “the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*” (Moretti 15). When the protagonist finds him or herself able to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory poles, he or she has transitioned from childhood naïveté to adulthood and, therefore, to a higher plane of understanding of the world. The *Bildung* reflects the Enlightenment thought from which it came — it requires “harmony of aesthetic, moral, rational, and scientific education” (Martini 5). However, since its birth and classification at the end of the 18th century, *Bildung* has also appeared in many other formats, including the postcolonial context. For example, as Feroza Jussawalla highlights in her essay “Kim, Huck and Naipaul: Using the Postcolonial Bildungsroman to (Re)define Postcoloniality,” postcolonial novelists made use of the genre to promote nationalist agendas.

⁴⁸ Emphasis original.

Fouad Laroui's first novel, *Une année chez les français*, fits the blueprint of a Bildungsroman: Mehdi (the protagonist) searches for the aforementioned "self-determination" in the face of the "demands of socialization" and his coming-of-age is marked by his arrival at a compromise. The novel is informed by its author's Moroccan origins, French education, and immigration experience from North Africa to Europe. Thus, it contains many of Laroui's biographical details despite featuring a fictional protagonist. Young Mehdi leaves his rural Atlas hometown in 1969 (after the European protectorates had been abolished in Morocco and during the reign of Hassan II) for Casablanca to begin his education at Lycée Lyautey, a school named after the French Army General famous for his contributions to the establishment of a global French empire, Hubert Lyautey.⁴⁹ Though the country's independence and constitutional monarchy had been fully established at that point, the people of Morocco were still adjusting to the end of French colonial presence.

Mehdi, like many others, finds himself pulled in one direction by the remnants of French imperialism and in the other by his small-town origins in Béni-Mallal. His solution, ultimately, is to cultivate what postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha has called a "Third Space" for himself (53-56), in which he (Mehdi) limits the influence of the expectations of others on his self-creation. However, before finding his Third Space, Mehdi moves through a series of failed experiments. Initially, he experiences culture shock, panics, and attempts to assimilate into his surroundings completely. He attempts to integrate himself into his new school environment by allowing Franco Moretti's "socialization" to become his primary goal and, in so doing, rejects his biological kin by pushing them aside, thereby implicitly denying his rural, Atlas origins. His trajectory is thus a model for the experimentation that must occur for young people to discover

⁴⁹ For more information on General Lyautey, see Singer and Langdon's *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire*.

their own “self-determination” rather than the path that others would choose for them. Despite the tumultuous transition from childhood to adolescence, Mehdi manages to tune out everyone else’s expectations of him and ultimately settles upon an identity rooted in cultural ambi- or polyvalence. His arrival at this new space represents his *Bildung*, his moment of apprenticeship, or his coming-of-age.

Une année therefore escapes both the classic Western model⁵⁰ and the postcolonial nationalist model⁵¹ that came before it. Mehdi’s search to define himself requires him to undo much of the European imperial logic that coincided with Enlightenment thinking and helped produce the Western *Bildung*. Additionally, while Mehdi’s coming-of-age parallels the struggles of his newly independent nation and while he struggles to come to terms with concepts such as race and class, his education takes place in an elite French school and his conclusions are far more ambivalent than they are nationalistic.

Mehdi’s experiences echo many of the struggles of francophone, Beur *Bildung* protagonists before him, such those of Farida Belghoul’s unnamed protagonist in her 1986 book *Georgette !*, or of Azouz in Azouz Begag’s autobiographical work of fiction, also published in 1986, *Le Gone du Chaâba*.⁵² Like Belghoul and Begag’s protagonists, Mehdi finds himself in a French school environment that feels foreign to him. The school undervalues his presence, and he struggles to process the messages he receives from school authorities as they conflict with those of his family, his peers, and his own conscience. He struggles to make friends of his new classmates, to understand his relationship to his teachers, and to decipher the role that his studies

⁵⁰ Examples of what I mean by the classic Western model include Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, and Gustav Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale*.

⁵¹ See Jussawalla, cited above.

⁵² For more on francophone or Beur *Bildungsromane*, see Laronde’s *L’écriture décentrée*.

will have in his life. However, unlike Begag and Belghoul's protagonists, Mehdi's most notable trial is developing an understanding of the difference between what feels familiar to him, and what is family. Ultimately, his coming-of-age will occur as he disentangles these two concepts from one another and cultivates a familiar family space.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the reasons why Mehdi rejects his origins and his biological kin. Subsequently, I outline the mechanisms he uses in order to do so. Lycée Lyautey is a boarding school far from his home, so Mehdi must sleep on the school premises, leaving his family behind. His lack of concrete identity when he arrives, in addition to his immersion in the school's Frenchified setting, leads him to break away from the ties that connect him to his previous home.

Section two is dedicated to the new bonds Mehdi cultivates in Casablanca. I begin with an analysis of Mehdi's strategies for fitting in and coping mechanisms in his new adopted family dynamic. His mother does not know that the students have the weekends off, but even if she did, she would not have the means to go get him every weekend. Therefore, Mehdi randomly picks a classmate, Denis Berger, and spends his weekends at the Berger home in Casablanca. Denis and his parents come to serve as a surrogate family for Mehdi, and I contend that, at one point, Mehdi believes himself to have achieved full integration into their family. Then, I move to examine how Mehdi's surrogacy experiences in the Berger household are paralleled in the lycée environment; his school becomes an adoptive extended family.

In section three, I argue that the Berger family and school develop an ambivalent "pull-push" gesture toward Mehdi in which they simultaneously draw him in and keep him at arm's

length. This pull-push⁵³ characterizes the combination of, on the one hand, the bonds Mehdi develops with Denis, the Bergers, and the school at large, and on the other, the racism that serves as his bondage in this new community. Regardless of his achievements, Mehdi learns that he will always be bound by his hometown, his biological family, his origins, and the genetic make-up that makes him look different from his European classmates.

Finally, in section four, I analyze the process by which Mehdi slowly destabilizes the relationship between family and familiar. I examine the scene in which Mehdi's suspicions that these two terms are not mutually inclusive are confirmed. As his illusions come crashing down, he realizes he will never be a part of the Berger family and comes-of-age. He accidentally arrives at his Third Space, which symbolizes his transgressive decision to come fully into himself. As Mehdi comes to see the subtle racism around him, his growing understanding of how racism works and how it affects him marks the site of his coming-of-age which, ultimately, requires him to develop his own definition of kinship.

Throughout this study of kinship in Laroui's *Une année chez les Français*, I argue that the protagonist comes-of-age by the end of the novel thanks to his new understanding of how his relationship bonds can become sites of bondage. By the time Mehdi develops a comfortable, Third Space environment, he has learned how his life will always be affected by the bondage of racism, classism and the expectations of others around him. However, in order to see how Mehdi learns from his mistakes and arrives at this conclusion, we must start at the beginning, and at the point where the naive protagonist arrives at school and unintentionally embarks on his Bildung process.

⁵³ While "push-pull" may sound more natural, I believe that "pull-push" more accurately represents this concept which is, first, the product of the family drawing Mehdi nearer to him, and second, of their reminding him of the distance that exists between them.

Mehdi's Rejection of his Kin and Origins

In his famous essay "Family Romances," Sigmund Freud describes the coming-of-age process in general and explains his theory that temporary surrogacy experiences constitute a process through which every child might develop psychologically: "At about this time, then, the child's imagination is occupied with the task of ridding himself of his parents, of whom he now has a low opinion, and replacing them by others, usually of superior social standing" (38). In Freud's theories, adoption or surrogacy occurs only as a fantasy of the mind. In Mehdi's specific coming-of-age experience, the process of ridding himself of his family is more literal, and it occurs as he is learning what it means to have a family of "superior social standing." During his time at Lycée Lyautey, he learns that his rural Moroccan origins mark a site of social bondage for him in his new, Frenchified Casablanca environment, so he begins the process of distancing himself from the kin and traditions that make up who he is.

For Mehdi, the process of separating himself from his family can be read as a rejection of his origins. His denial of his origins also creates distance between himself and his family because he conflates specific family members and experiences with their larger context. Therefore, when Mehdi moves away from identifying with his Moroccaness, it can be read as step away from his family, and when he forgets his family, he is also forgetting the larger social customs that have made him who he is to this point. To understand Mehdi's rejection of his kin fully, it is essential to begin with why he decides to move away from them, then to examine how by asking which separate mechanisms he uses to sever his emotional bond from them before ultimately replacing them with a surrogate family.

In most (if not all) social situations, Laroui depicts Mehdi as an outsider looking in. For example, *Une année* opens with Mehdi's arrival at the lycée's front desk. Within the first few pages of the book, Mehdi is denied the possibility of defining himself at his new school; perceptions of his race and of his wealth (or lack thereof?) set him apart as an outsider from the moment he crosses the threshold. Mehdi is greeted by Miloud, the concierge, whose Arab origins are marked linguistically by his (mis)pronunciation of certain words (10). Mehdi, feeling shy, does not respond and it becomes apparent that he is already a stranger in this new environment despite having just arrived:

Celui-là était incontestablement marocain. Tous les Français étaient blonds, *savait* Miloud, après milles preuves du contraire [...] Et puis, cette valise usée, avec sa ridicule poignée blanche... Ce n'était pas le bagage d'un *nasrani*,⁵⁴ ça ! Tous les Français sont riches, c'est bien connu. Non, *celui-là* ne pouvait être qu'un enfant du pays. Il reprit, en version bilingue, d'une voix plus rouge : — Où sont tes parents ? *Fine waldik* ? (11)

This one is certainly Moroccan. Miloud *knew* that all French people are blond, despite thousands of cases to the contrary [...] And besides, that beat up suitcase, with its ridiculous white handle... That couldn't possibly belong to a *nasrani*! It's common knowledge that all French people are rich. No, *this one* had to be a local boy. He tried again, raising his voice, and in a bilingual version this time, "Where are your parents? *Fine waldik?*"⁵⁵

Here, Laroui keeps the reader in the same state of confusion as both Mehdi and the school staff who receive him by not describing the purpose of his arrival. Mehdi's outsider status foreshadows the negotiation process Mehdi will have to undertake to reconcile his vision of himself with that of others around him.

As Mehdi makes observations about his new school, he consistently uses the possessive adjective "leur" or 'their' to describe what he sees around him and, with this simple grammatical choice, Laroui drives home the point that Mehdi's intuition tells him he is an intruder in this

⁵⁴ Arabic term for Christian, believed to have derived from the same linguistic root as Nazareth.

⁵⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. If Laroui's text includes Arabic or Moroccan darija, I have left it untranslated in my English translations.

school (34). The people around him remind him of his outsidership at every turn. He experiences blatant racism as the contents of his baggage are emptied, inventoried by the school laundress and used by the school staff to make assumptions about his family. The laundress questions how Mehdi could be missing so many articles of clothing (19) from his trousseau, and Mehdi becomes the victim of what Laura Reeck has called “blind” universalism, or unintentional discrimination of disadvantaged students due to presumed equal access to resources (*Writerly Identities* 35). His classmates are confused by him when they ask, “Tu n’as jamais regardé la *télé de ta vie* ?” (79) ‘You’ve never watch television in your *whole life*?’ As they go on to remark that everyone, even goats, watched Americans land on the moon in July, they reduce his access to contemporary events to less than that of a goat. Mehdi imagines they see him as alien due to his lack of access to television.

However, Mehdi arrived at the school campus already imagining himself an outsider. In one scene, he recalls feeling that way in Béni-Mallal; he chose to read a book during an earthquake and felt the eyes of his family members on him as they struggled to understand him (31). Mehdi’s perception of his outsidership in both Béni-Mallal and at Lycée Lyautey in Casablanca is one of the reasons he attempts to dissociate himself from his past and his kin to redefine himself. His initial experience with the school administration and the disbelief of his classmates that someone like him exists leave him ready for the upcoming process through which he will both consciously and subconsciously reject his origins.

The second reason Mehdi spurns his family and the role they have in his life is due to his lack of firm identity when he arrives at the school (an unsurprising fact, perhaps, considering that he is ten years old). His apprenticeship will involve learning about new concepts that often inform

one's identity, including race, class and the politics of language,⁵⁶ and cultivating kinship structures that complement the identity he develops. However, upon his arrival, he lives at the crossroads of everyone else's expectations for him: the fact that he is the school's scholarship recipient means that he arrives already with a reputation (15), his mother makes him promise that he will be first in his class (41), and the larger Moroccan community cautions him against becoming "too French" (49). As the story unfolds, Mehdi must learn to decide how these expectations as well as those of additional individuals will inform his choices about who to call family.

One of the main ways in which Mehdi rejects his family is a passive one, through his omissions or non-claiming of them. When Miloud asks him where his parents are in the passage above, he freezes and does not respond. Though Mehdi's non-response can be attributed in part to his quiet nature, his omission is also a reflection of his inability to take ownership of his unique situation. Miloud's question, "Où sont tes parents ? *Fine waldik ?*" (11) 'Where are your parents? *Fine waldik?*', anticipates a certain response that Mehdi cannot give. For example, the question is about his parents in the plural form but Mehdi does not have a father-figure. Additionally, the question assumes that Mehdi's parents could have and should have accompanied him to school. Answering the question honestly would require Mehdi to state that he does not have a father and that his mother does not have her own transportation, could not afford to come with him, and could not leave his siblings alone at home. Instead, Mehdi remains silent and, in his silence, he denies each of those facts about him.

At the end of October, a similar situation arises in which Mehdi does not assert the unique position of his family. In this scene, Mehdi realizes the school will be closed for a long

⁵⁶ These sites of apprenticeship are examined in more detail in section three.

weekend in observance of Toussaint or All Saint's Day. (Up to that point, Mehdi had spent each of his weekends at the school, but this time he will have no choice but to leave.) He knows intuitively that no one will come to pick him up and his deeply imbedded need to remain unnoticed results in a second denial of his familial origins when he does not notify any of the school staff that he has nowhere to go.

As Mehdi counts down to the dreaded long weekend, Laroui adopts a different narrative style in order to catalogue Mehdi's fear of standing out and highlight the extent of his omission regarding his family background. The chapter is broken up with subtitles that mark the passing time as Mehdi watches his classmates leave. Initially, at "17.00" or '5:00pm,' Mehdi sits patiently, with his luggage, as the students are picked up by their families, and he knows full well that his mother will not come get him: "Mehdi est le seul qui ne regarde pas par la fenêtre de la loge" (169) 'Mehdi is the only one who does not watch through the window.' 5:00pm becomes 6:00pm, which turns into 6:30pm, at which point Mehdi is the only student left. Mehdi is forestalling the inevitable and betraying his family with his omission each time a block of time passes and he has not come clean. He unintentionally robs his family of the opportunity to make arrangements for him, rationalizing his decision with his mother's lack of resources. Eventually, he is forced to confront the school staff when they ask "—Alors, tu as appelé tes parents ?" (172) 'So, did you call your parents?' Mehdi had not called them; there are very few phones in his town and none of them belong to his mother. He remains silent and omits this information, too.

Because they are looking to get rid of Mehdi and of the responsibility of taking care of him, the staff trap Mehdi into another omission. The only idea they have is to ask him to name his closest friend at school:

Mehdi n'a pas d'amis (il ne sait même pas ce que ça veut dire). Il fait semblant de réfléchir. [...] La peur tord les tripes de l'enfant. Un nom fuse de sa bouche, comme

malgré à lui : — Denis Berger. Tiens ! Pourquoi ce nom a-t-il jailli ? Il n'a jamais adressé la parole à ce Denis. (173-174)

Mehdi doesn't have friends (he doesn't even know what that means). He pretends to reflect on their question [...] Fear seizes the child. A name escapes his mouth, as if in spite of him, "Denis Berger." How odd! Why did that name pop out? He had never uttered a word to Denis.

In this instance, as with previous examples, the school staff asks a leading question that implies that Mehdi should have friends and, among them, a best friend. He (and the reader alike) knows nothing about Denis. Mehdi omits the fact that he has no friends because it speaks to his difference from the other students. Then, feeling pressured to produce something, he says the first name that comes to mind and tells a lie, moving in to a second, more explicit, set of familial rejections. As the novel progresses, the reader notes that although the choice was random for Mehdi, Denis, a blond boy whose name is indicative of French ancestry, may have been an intentional choice for Laroui. However, in the meantime, Mehdi finds himself in a car, on the way to the Bergers' home and then wandering through their neighborhood while looking for their house.

In addition to omitting details about himself that he feels would only serve as sites of bondage for him, Mehdi also uses lies to maneuver away from his family. Some of these lies are in response to the unwanted attention he attracts to himself. For example, in the school cafeteria, a student named Nagi asks Mehdi why he arrived on campus so early (he was the first to arrive), and Mehdi responds that his parents are very rich and in New York (63). Mehdi cannot erase his difference entirely and align himself with Nagi because, no matter how he spins the story, the fact remains that he arrived on campus much earlier than his classmates. Mehdi does not calculate consciously that with this lie he invented a family "of superior social standing" to his own, but that's exactly what he does. He substitutes his family's poverty and inability to drop

him off at school later with an excess of wealth that prohibited them from doing so. In creating a set of imaginary kin that are wealthier than his own, he had to create wealth greater than that of Nagi's family in order to account for his early arrival. Mehdi is no closer to feeling like he fits in with his classmates because, now, thanks to his lie, Nagi believes that Mehdi is wealthier than the average student.

Mehdi's lies are not premeditated but, when put on the spot, he impulsively senses that the truth about who he is and where he is from marks a site of bondage for him among his peers. The answers to their questions will inevitably shape their opinion of him so he responds in a (semi-)calculated manner to escape the associations his peers would have with the truth. In a second example, Mehdi attempts to dodge the attention of Madini, who wonders why he spends all of his weekends on campus. He asks Mehdi where he is from and what his father does for a living; presumably he hopes that Mehdi's father's profession will shed light on his constant presence at school. Here, again, telling the truth would require Mehdi to admit that his father is not present in his life (whether he died or disappeared is never clarified) and he does not know what he did professionally when he was around. Despite the nagging voice in his head that tells him he should tell the truth, he bursts out, "Il est japonais !" (125), 'He is Japanese!' which is neither a profession nor an explanation for Mehdi's weekends at school.

As he falls asleep, Mehdi inventories the strange variety of descriptors that he has acquired throughout the day.

Mehdi se glissa vite dans son lit, toujours mortifié par l'incident nippon. En fermant les yeux, il se souvint qu'au cours de cette journée Morel l'avait traité d'orphelin puis de marquise ; Régnier, de prolétaire ; le cuisinier de moutchou et de pitchoun ; Madini d'idiot. Il s'était lui-même accusé, sans raison, d'être japonais. Il eut la vague intuition que tout cela s'équilibrait, d'une façon ou d'une autre, et qu'à force de le traiter de tous les noms, les gens ne pouvaient savoir qui il était vraiment, ce qui était sans doute une bonne chose. En somme, il était tout et n'importe quoi. (126)

Mehdi slipped quickly under the sheets, still feeling mortified by the Japanese incident. As he closed his eyes, he remembered that through the course of the day Morel had called him an orphan and then a Marquise; Régnier called him a proletarian; the cook called him a moutchou and a pitchoun; Madini called him an idiot. He had even accused himself, for no real reason, of being Japanese. He had a feeling that perhaps all of these names negated each other and, somehow or another, that by calling him all of the names, people would never know what he really was, which was definitely a good thing. In sum, he was everything and nothing.

As Mehdi puts distance between himself and his Béni-Mallal kin by creating an imaginary, Japanese, wealthy family in New York, he does not have a clear sense of toward whom he would like to move and thus chooses arbitrarily. He may reach the conclusion that he is everything and nothing, and his lies are also clearly a product of his lack of clear identity, but regardless of how he conceives of it all, the lies are also a denial of his origins and a rejection of his family. With each lie about his family, he unintentionally chips away at the connection he has with them.

Finally, in what is perhaps the greatest offense in regards to Mehdi's metaphorical repudiation of his family, he simply stops being concerned about them. Laroui shows the manner in which Mehdi allows them to slip out of his consciousness with two contrasting passages. The first passage takes place shortly after Mehdi has arrived on the school premises. He becomes emotional when he realizes he does not have anything to read: "Pour la première fois de sa vie, il n'avait pas de livre à portée de main et ne savait donc comment occuper son temps. À propos de livres... Il se souvint avec nostalgie du tremblement de terre qui avait frappé Béni-Mallal, l'année précédente." (29) 'For the first time in his life, he didn't have a book at the ready and, therefore, he did not know how to occupy his time. Speaking of books... He thought back nostalgically to last year, when Béni-Mallal was hit by an earthquake.' When he thinks back to the earthquake, he recalls his family staring at him incredulously as he reads silently in the street while an earthquake is happening around them. Mehdi remembers feeling like a stranger among his family members, but the manner in which the memory is triggered by ordinary events in

Mehdi's life serves as an emphasis of his family's continued relevance. In the literary present, he is annoyed by his lack of reading material and recalls a more comfortable environment, his home, where he was able to be himself and read to his heart's delight despite the judgmental glances of his parents and siblings. His ability to be himself regardless of the clear lack of understanding displayed by people around him points to his comfort in his home environment.

The second, contrasting passage occurs much later; Mehdi thinks of his family in Béni-Mallal, but the thought is fleeting, and he is unconcerned about their well-being:

Mehdi ne voyait plus sa famille. Il faut dire qu'ils semblaient avoir beaucoup de problèmes. Il ne comprenait pas de quoi il s'agissait. De toute façon, on ne lui disait rien. Sa mère ne sortait jamais de la maison. Son frère et sa sœur allaient au collège de Béni-Mallal. C'était à peu près tout ce qu'il savait. Ceux qui s'occupaient de cette famille – il y avait forcément des gens qui s'en occupaient, des oncles, des tantes – devaient s'imaginer que Mehdi nageait en plein bonheur dans son internat, dans le très chic lycée Lyautey, et qu'il ne fallait surtout pas le déranger... (191)

Mehdi didn't see his family anymore. It seemed as if they had lots of problems. He didn't really understand what it was all about. Anyway, no one ever said anything to him. His mother never left the house. His brother and sister went to the Béni-Mallal middle school. That was about all he knew. Those who looked out for this family – there was likely to be someone looking out for them, uncles, aunts – must have imagined that Mehdi was basking in his boarding school experience, at the very chic Lycée Lyautey, and that it was essential not to disturb him.

Mehdi is aware that his family is struggling but he does not worry because he assumes that someone else will handle it. The language of the passage alludes to Mehdi's apathy about his family's situation; he does not feel the need to verify that they are looked after or to check in and, instead, he returns to his present situation. He refers to his mother and siblings as "cette famille" or 'that family' as if they no longer belong to him or are no longer his responsibility. The process through which Mehdi mentally casts his family aside marks the final site at which he rejects them in favor of pursuing alternate kinship structures. His attempts to move away from

his family and deny the bonds he shares with them represent his desire to move away from the bondage they represent.

Up to this point, the school staff has failed Mehdi. When he arrived, they judged him based on his physical appearance and strengthened his already-present feelings of being an outsider by subjecting him to embarrassing scrutiny. The school sets him apart from the other students (whether on purpose or accidentally), which exacerbates the distinction he draws between himself and the others. His predicament (a product of his unique background and desire to fit in among his classmates) is completely lost on them. They make assumptions about Mehdi and his family, the most egregious of which is that his mother is aware of the long weekend, that she is reachable by phone, and that she would surely pick him up if either of those were true. The fact they do not want to deal with him over the long weekend and their failures to imagine Mehdi's situation mean that they are sending him to spend a holiday, that he does not celebrate, in the home of perfect strangers.

Mehdi, unsure of what else to do, manufactures a bond with Denis on the spot and then begins hoping for a miracle and a magical fast-forwarding of the weekend. Divulging his situation was never a viable option, because a confession would have required him to bring his difference from the other students sharply into focus. His desperation to belong, combined with this strange set of circumstances, results in a lie, which throughout the remainder of the novel, will become a reality. The bondage Mehdi perceives due to the school's failures leaves him poised to seek inclusion elsewhere. He had no way of knowing it when he lied to the school staff about Denis, but the pair of boys will go on to develop a deep friendship thanks to this initial predicament. As he leaves to spend the weekend with the Bergers, each moment leading up to

this point will result in his attempts to forge new bonds of belonging and to replace his kin with people who he believes will help him fit in.

Familial Surrogacy: Cultivating Alternate Kinship Bonds as a Strategy for Fitting In

Before leaving for the Bergers' home, Mehdi had very little experience with the possibility of crafting new familial relationships. While on the school premises, he had noticed a confounding poster that advertised a ski-vacation experience using images of an idyllic French family:

Revivant toutes ces aventures, allant de l'extincteur à l'affiche du CAF, Mehdi passa quelques heures mouvementées. Parmi la foule d'interrogations que le panneau providentiel avait soulevées, une l'intrigua en particulier. Comment un « Club français » pouvait-il être une « association marocaine » ? Sur la photo, tous les visages étaient indubitablement *nasrani* : peau rose et yeux bleus. Et lui, plus tard, quand il saurait skier, pourrait-il en être, de ce CAF mystérieux ? Ou fallait-il avoir les yeux bleus ?

Une grande famille !

Elle était accueillant, cette famille ? (56)

Mehdi spent several turbulent hours reliving all of those adventures and moving between the fire-extinguisher and the CAF poster. Among all of the crazy questions inspired by the sign, one intrigued him in particular. How could a “French club” be a “Moroccan association?” In the photo, all of the faces were *nasrani* without a doubt: pink skin and blue eyes. And what about him, later, once he knew how to ski? Could he be part of this mysterious CAF? Or was having blue eyes a prerequisite?

One big family!

Was this family welcoming?

The CAF, or French Alpine Club, appeals to its members by advertising itself as a one big family. As he gazes at the poster, Mehdi asks himself questions about this extended family and about the requirements of membership and belonging should he decide one day that he wants to join. He notices that the family described by the poster seems to be made up of members who share similar features to one another and the questions he poses imply he understands this metaphorical family might be unwelcoming to someone who does not look like them. However,

as Mehdi leaves the safety of his school campus to find the Berger family for Toussaint, he abandons his skeptical disposition as well.

Once in the Berger home, Mehdi very quickly comes to think of himself as one of them. Initially there were a few uncomfortable moments: Denis shows Mehdi to his room and shares his comic books but does not seem happy, and Mme Berger is visibly uncomfortable with his presence in their home. Mehdi feels confused by his situation and continually asks himself, “*Qu’est-ce que je fais ici ?*” (179) ‘What am I doing here?’ He experiences mild culture shock at the things he observes around him.

Laroui titles his fourteenth chapter “Un week-end chez les français” ‘A Weekend with French People’ and his fifteenth “La nouvelle famille de Mehdi” ‘Mehdi’s New Family’ to highlight how quickly Mehdi goes from thinking of the Bergers as French people to seeing them as his family. Mehdi begins spending all of his weekends with the Bergers and Mehdi and Denis become best friends. Mehdi thinks of himself as a surrogate or adopted son; from his perspective, he has bonded with them and is fully integrated with them:

Au cours des semaines qui suivirent, Mehdi et Denis devinrent les meilleurs amis du monde. Avoir passé tout un week-end ensemble, avoir lu les mêmes bandes dessinées, avoir dormi dans la même chambre, tout cela créait des liens solides entre eux. Et puis il semblait à Mehdi qu’ils avaient un peu la même mère, maintenant (elle lui avait lacé les souliers, non ?), même si elle était un peu bizarre — mais choisit-on ses parents ? (190)

Over the course of the following weeks, Mehdi and Denis became the best of friends. Having passed a weekend together, read the same comic books, slept in the same room, all of that created a very solid connection between them. And then it seemed to Mehdi that they more or less had the same mother now (she had tied his shoes, right?), even if she was a little odd — but can one choose one’s parents?

For Mehdi, entrance to the family and full inclusion among them was easy: he feels at home; he reads all of Denis’s comic books; they sleep in the same room. In the last sentence of the above passage, Mehdi makes an age-old point about family (and the fact that one cannot choose it).

Ironically, choosing one's own family is precisely what Mehdi did and what he continues to do in his adoption of the Bergers. Laroui punctuates the sentence with a question mark signals the possibility of multiple answers. For Mehdi, the answer is simple. The imaginary rich, Japanese father, away on business in New York and the abstract, blond-haired blue-eyed CAF family fade into irrelevance as he adopts a surrogate family that feels much more tangible: the Bergers. Via his role as the surrogate son to this family, Mehdi is given a chance to use the Bergers' and his newly found bond with them to define himself, his identity, and his social circumstances to the outside world. He recovers the opportunity that was not afforded to him by the school staff when he first arrived in Casablanca.

At first, it is unclear whether Mehdi has elected to begin spending his weekends with Denis and his family due to convenience or a lack of alternative. After all, previously he did not have anywhere else to go and maybe he simply did not want to return to being at school all weekend. However, these questions are dispelled as the Christmas holiday approaches. Mehdi suspects that his family will anticipate the school's closure this time, so he returns to his previous strategies, which included lying, to reject his family. He finds Régnier in the school study and says:

— M'sieur, je crois que mes parents vont venir me chercher à Noël pour que je travaille chez l'ambassadeur du Japon pour gagner un peu d'argent mais moi, je préfère passer les vacances à lire les *Tout l'Univers* de Denis Berger. (Un temps.) Est-ce que vous pourriez leur envoyer une lettre pour leur dire que je dois rester à Casablanca et que c'est beaucoup mieux pour moi... pour les études... (208)

Mister, I think my parents are going to come pick me up for Christmas so that I can work in the Japanese ambassador's office to earn a little money, but I prefer to spend the break reading Denis Berger's *Tout l'Univers*. (A few moments later.) Do you think you could write them a letter and tell them that I should stay in Casablanca and that it's much better for me... and for my studies...

Mehdi lies to both Régnier about his biological family, and to his family in Béni-Mallal about his plans. He would prefer to stay with the Berger family over the break, so he removes the only obstacle: his biological family. This intentional evasion of his Béni-Mallal family affirms that Mehdi's substitution is not accidental or circumstantial. He trades his biological family for this pseudo-adoptive one and his own family begins to feel less and less familiar to him, while his surrogate family grows more familiar. As he seeks integration with the Bergers, he destabilizes the relationship between family and familiar. The Bergers are his new family, and he wants them to see him in the same way.

In his attempts to assimilate into the family, Mehdi controls the perception that the Bergers have of him by observing his surroundings and trying to blend in. In one particular scene, the work of fitting in with the Bergers is particularly difficult for Mehdi:

M. Berger est maintenant à la manœuvre. Le bateau se détache du quai, il glisse bientôt sur les eaux calmes du port. Au-delà de la jetée, la mer est agitée, des vagues se forment, le plancher tangué. Mehdi est un peu pâle mais pour rien au monde il n'avouerait qu'il n'a pas le pied marin. M. et Mme Berger ont l'air de trouver tout naturel que tout bouge autour d'eux, que l'horizon bascule, que le ciel tourne. Denis a l'air de s'amuser. Mehdi feint de jouir de chaque instant, il imite les gestes de l'autre, ses mimiques, ses petits cris. (219)

Mr. Berger is at the helm. The boat pulls away from the dock and slides out onto the calm waters of the port. Beyond the pier, the sea is frothy with waves and the ground feels like it's swaying. Mehdi feels pale but he wouldn't admit that he doesn't have sea legs for anything in the world. Mr. and Mrs. Berger don't seem at all bothered by the fact that everything around them is moving, including the teetering horizon and spinning sky. Denis seems to be having fun. Mehdi pretends to be basking in each instant. He imitates the body language of his friend, his silly faces, his excited cries.

The Bergers often enjoy outings on the water together, and Mehdi knows he needs to develop a fondness for the water to fit in better in this family. He feels sick, but he watches Denis closely and copies his emotive expressions and persona to create the sense that he is enjoying the boat experience as much as Denis.

In his essay, “The Line of the Light” (part of the seminar series *Of the Gaze*), Jacques Lacan describes the psychoanalytic process of mimicry:

Indeed, it is in this domain that the dimension by which the subject is to be inserted in the picture is presented. Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against the mottled background of becoming mottled — exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. (99)

Lacan’s description allows to see that Mehdi cannot “harmonize” with the Berger family; the most he can hope for in this passage is the illusion of fitting in with them. The repetitive process through which he mimics and fails to integrate himself produces a heightened awareness of his contrast against the background. While in this particular scene the Berger family is not reading his “camouflage,” he knows that he is feigning enjoyment and the effect of his mimicry is not lost on him. The result is that he feels more like an imposter than ever before.

The Bergers’ Pull-Push of Mehdi

Through Mehdi’s experience in the Berger household, the reader has access to more information than Mehdi and, also, picks up on the oddity of certain elements of his relationship with them, to which he is completely oblivious. Thus, the reader knows that the Bergers’ view of Mehdi is very different from his understanding of how he fits in with them. Laroui’s descriptions of Mehdi’s time with them are peppered with details that suggest that they have grown to love Mehdi *like* a son but that they do not reciprocate his view that he now is fully part of the family.

When Mehdi initially arrives, Mme Berger behaves very strangely toward him, and Mehdi’s impression of her is that she is mean. In one example, she asks Denis to make Mehdi change his blue pajamas (which he has borrowed from the Bergers) and Mehdi does not understand why (182-83). The mysterious behavior continues the following day at breakfast,

when Denis mentions Pascal, a person with whom Mehdi is not familiar (184), and Saturday night Mehdi pretends to be asleep while Mme Berger hovers over him, caresses his hair, and begins to cry (185). Mehdi decides that she is not mean but remains confounded by her seemingly contradictory behavior. His confusion dissipates shortly thereafter when he finds a photo of Denis and a boy who looks exactly like him. On the back of the photo, he reads the words “*Denis et Pascal, vacances d’hiver*” (189) ‘Denis and Pascal, winter vacation.’ Pascal is wearing the blue pajamas in the photo and Mehdi realizes that, at some point, Denis had a brother, Pascal.

With the implied revelation that Denis has (or more likely, had) a twin brother, Mehdi’s presence in the home is complicated. (It remains unclear whether or not Mehdi understands that the Berger family has likely experienced a major loss.) Pascal’s presence in the story illuminates the Bergers’ motivation for including Mehdi in their family dynamic; they are using him to fill a void that is likely still very fresh in their lives. Are the Bergers invested in Mehdi, specifically, or are they invested in recreating a previous familial structure in which they are a family of four? Their view of him contrasts sharply from his understanding of their role in his life and can be read as a case study of Derrida’s aporia of absolute hospitality, wherein absolute hospitality is impossible because, in order to be hospitable, the host must continually assert his/her ownership of that which he is offering the guest (*Of Hospitality*).

In Mehdi’s case, the aporia of absolute hospitality results from the Bergers’ simultaneous pulling of Mehdi closer to them and pushing him away. I call this ambivalent, emotional action their pull-push of him. The family continually alludes to Mehdi’s inclusion through their generosity with him (pulling), which mirrors his growing friendship with their son. However, this message of acceptance is undermined each time one of the Bergers reminds Mehdi that he

does not entirely fit in with them (pushing). In his famous chapter, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” from *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha describes the sensation of near-belonging as “not quite/not white” (131). Bhabha’s theory posits that as non-whites inch closer to the colonizer, they are simultaneously embraced and rejected by the colonizer’s community, which pull-pushes outsiders. The duplicity of the pull-push occurs as individuals, such as Mehdi, conform more closely with a new environment and, thus, they are pulled closer and set apart within their communities by the colonizer as models of the possibilities of inclusion. However, these individuals remain outsiders who are “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 127) accepted or integrated.

Mehdi’s relationship of being *like family* to the Bergers signals his near acceptance within a French family and, more broadly, to being considered French or white. However, the fact remains that he is not French, or white, and he must confront the fact that he is “not quite” family and “not quite” one of them. He fails to meet the requirements of full inclusion, or of an informal adoption, into the family. While he senses that this might be the case, initially he is unable to understand the cause of the non-acceptance he feels. In what follows, we will examine the manner in which the Bergers pull-push⁵⁷ Mehdi, the larger forces that drive their attitude towards him and the implications for him as he discerns his place in this environment.

Mehdi is more consciously aware of the moments in which the Bergers draw him nearer. He takes note of these instances and feels the euphoria of belonging. The first moment he feels like family to them occurs near the end of his first weekend in their home:

⁵⁷ Unlike many Bildungsroman protagonists before him, Mehdi is not pulled between the two opposing poles of school and home. Instead, his status as a boarding-school student creates a different intermediary position that is the result of being pulled toward and pushed away from the same pole: European Casablanca.

Mme Berger sourit à Mehdi (il écarquille les yeux de stupéfaction), lui caresse les cheveux comme la veille au soir quand elle croyait qu'il dormait. [...] Puis, se baissant, elle lui lace les souliers. *Elle – lui – lace – les – souliers.* (188)

Mme Berger smiles at Mehdi (his eyes widen with stupefaction), she caresses his hair like the night before when she thought he was sleeping. [...] Then, bending over, she ties his shoes. *She – ties – his – shoes.*

Mehdi would call the Bergers his family and, thus, he inscribes even the most banal of activities with meaning. He notices that Mme is just as likely to help him with his shoelaces as she is her biological son and he projects as a sign of acceptance onto his tied shoelaces. Mehdi experiences this moment as Mme Berger pulling him closer to her and to the rest of the family.

The instances in which Mehdi feels pulled closer to the Bergers only grow in frequency from here. He transitions to spending his weekends with them without an official invitation or conversation. Everyone moves on autopilot as if Mehdi had been coming home with Denis on Saturday mornings all along. In subsequent weekends together, Mehdi discovers that he has been given a set of drawers with socks, underwear and a small packet of lavender to keep everything smelling fresh (191). These drawers symbolize Mehdi's presence in the home even when he is away at school and the expectation that he will return each following weekend to make use of his things and occupy his space in their lives. For Mehdi, the drawers imply his permanence in their lives and their acceptance of him as family.

In other instances, the ambivalent pull-push of a particular action is more clearly visible to Mehdi. For example, in one scene Mme Berger jokes with her husband, Denis, and Mehdi that to earn their *bise*⁵⁸ they must say something flattering about Mozart. Denis is the first to earn his kiss (212), and after M. Berger receives his, he asks about Mehdi's (213). When Mehdi does finally receive a kiss, it is on his cheek rather than on his nose — the spot where Mme kisses

⁵⁸ *Bise*: small kiss, usually on some skin other than the lips.

both Denis and M. Berger (216). While the degree of intimacy of a kiss on the nose versus the cheek could be debated, most relevant is simply that while Mehdi was pulled closer to the family by the sheer presence of a small kiss, he was also pushed away from them by its slight difference from the others. As he lays in bed that night trying to fall asleep, he meditates on the small difference and the overall shape of his nose as it compares to Denis's. His thoughts lead him to wonder whether the kiss he received on his cheek is somehow due to the shape of his nose or a racial difference. Regardless, the full weight of Mme Berger's choice to kiss his cheek is inaccessible to him.

Similarly, the Bergers often refer to Mehdi as "notre Mehdi" in a way that highlights the pull-push occurring in the family dynamic. M. Berger refers to Mehdi in this way in the scene with the bise above. He asks, "— Et notre petit Mehdi ? Sa bise ?" (213) 'And our little Mehdi? Where's his kiss?' Here, the possessive adjective "notre" or 'our' is a pull-push in and of itself: it feels like a term of endearment while simultaneously indicating ownership in a slightly condescending manner. M. Berger is laying claim to Mehdi while revealing his membership in the family; his use of "notre" indicates that he feels a level of intimacy towards him.

In a contrasting passage, Mme Berger conflates Mehdi with her distorted views on race and nationality. She attempts to educate the boys about immigration and how it does or does not work: "Et Mehdi, (elle tapota la tête du petit garçon), *notre* Mehdi, il sera toujours marocain" (228) 'And Mehdi, (she tapped the boy's head), *our* Mehdi, he will always be Moroccan.' Like M. Berger before her, Mme claims Mehdi as part of the family with the possessive adjective and intends for it to be an affectionate way of referring to him. However, her message is that Mehdi (unlike other immigrants in France) will always be Moroccan and can never be fully French (or European more generally) no matter where he lives or for how long. Scholars such as Alec G.

Hargreaves have shown that this view of North Africans or Muslims as un-assimilable or un-integrable is a predominant one and is often due to religious difference (157). According to Mme, Mehdi will never shed his Moroccan-ness, whether due to religion or not, because it is ingrained and essential to his person. With her use of “notre” she pulls Mehdi closer to the family by gesturing at belonging and, subsequently, she essentializes him due to his race and nationality, thereby pushing him away.

Mme Berger is not the only family member who is guilty of boiling Mehdi down to this one facet of his person. When he first arrived in their home, M. Berger did something similar when making a feeble attempt at small talk with the boy: “Nous vivons depuis plusieurs années au Maroc, mais beaucoup de choses sont encore nouvelles ou étranges pour nous. Des choses qui doivent te sembler assez banales, non ?” (180) ‘We’ve been living in Morocco for several years now but many things remain new and strange to us. Things that must be relatively banal for you, right?’ Mehdi admits internally that absolutely nothing about this scene feels banal to him. When he asked the question, M. Berger did not know yet that Mehdi is Moroccan, but he jumps to that conclusion because of Mehdi’s physical name and appearance. Additionally, M. Berger generalizes Moroccan culture and lumps the experiences of an environment such as Casablanca in with those of Béni-Mallal and concludes that all aspects of Moroccan culture must feel familiar to Mehdi. M. Berger imagines a unified, national culture rather than seeing the multiplicity of cultures that make up his surroundings in Morocco. In this way, the family fetishizes Mehdi, his Moroccanness, and the access they believe he has to all things Moroccan, inscribing him in a form of new orientalism (Spivak, “Burden of English” 134).

M. and Mme Berger also make assumptions about Mehdi’s religious practices. Though they have chosen to include him in their family time, they remind him that he is different from

them because of his religion. Interestingly, religion never comes up in conversation and no one ever explicitly asks Mehdi whether he is a Muslim or his family practices this faith. Instead, his difference from the Bergers is made clear to him when Denis and his parents chose to consume sparkling wine and pork in front of him. On multiple occasions, in what feels like an afterthought, it occurs to Mme Berger that Mehdi cannot have either of those things. Usually the realization takes place as M. Berger is serving him (211) and her forceful reaction sidelines Mehdi, who does not understand either what the wine and pork are or why he cannot consume them. The Bergers do not take Mehdi into account when they plan their meals and they do not ask him or present him with options when they are serving him. Instead, they prohibit him from consuming pork and alcohol based on their understanding of his faith. They remain oblivious to the effects of their enforcement of his difference, and they go on eating and drinking in front of him. Later, when Mehdi is tired of feeling ostracized, he samples both the pork and the wine and, when his reaction is disgust, he takes it as a sign that he does not belong after all (224).

Perhaps the most striking example of how the Bergers keep Mehdi at arm's length despite his presence in their family occurs in a scene where Denis reveals to his family that Mehdi is first in his class for his grades in French. The conversation arises when Mehdi is trying to earn his bise and he does so by reciting the first stanza of Verlaine's "Art poétique"⁵⁹ at Christmas time.

Mme Berger reacts:

— [...] La question que je me pose est : comment un enfant de dix, onze ans est-il capable de réciter du Verlaine ? Ce n'est pas au programme de la sixième, je suppose, ou alors les temps ont vraiment changé.

Denis continua :

— Même en classe, il sort des trucs bizarres. (Sans transition.) Il est le premier en français...

Mme Berger, toujours pas revenue de son étonnement parnassien, interrompit Denis.

— Comment ça ? Tu veux dire qu'il est le premier *des Marocains* ?

⁵⁹ 19th century poem considered a classic, known for its "decadent" style and moralizing themes.

— Non, c'est lui qui a les meilleures notes. De tous.
Elle fronça les sourcils.

— Mais alors, vous ne faites pas beaucoup d'efforts, toi, et la fille des Kirchhoff, et le fils Fetter et les autres, Loviconi et la petite Bernadette...

— Non, maman, on fait tout ce qu'on peut, il est plus fort que nous.
Elle secoua la tête et fit la grimace pendant que M. Berger la regardait, l'air faussement scandalisé.

— Mais enfin, Ginette, pourquoi un petit Marocain ne pourrait-il pas être le premier de la classe ? Tu n'es quand même pas raciste ?

— Ah, je t'en prie ! On ne dit pas des mots pareils, même pour plaisanter. Tu oublies mon oncle mort en déportation... [...] Et d'abord, ne m'appelle pas Ginette quand il y a des étrangers.

M. Berger jeta un coup d'œil sur Mehdi, qui était en voie de disparition.

— Lui ? Mais c'est un enfant !

— Peut-être, mais on n'est pas en famille. Tu ne m'appelles pas Ginette !

M. Berger haussa les sourcils de façon exagérée.

— Très bien, *Geneviève*. (Il avait appuyé sur le prénom.) Mais tout cela ne m'explique pas ce qui te choque...

Elle lui coupa la parole.

— C'est une question de *langue maternelle* ! [...] (214-15)

— What I want to know is, how is a child who is ten, eleven years old capable of reciting Verlaine? It's not part of the sixth-year curriculum, I'm guessing, or else times have really changed.

Denis continued:

— Even in class, he produces these weird things. (Without transition.) He's the first in our class in French...

Mme Berger, still coming out of her poetic shock, interrupted Denis.

— What do you mean? You mean that he's first among *the Moroccans*?

— No, he has the best notes. Of all of us.
Her eyebrows dropped into a frown.

— Well then, you all must not be trying very hard, you, the Kirchhoff's daughter, the Fetter's son and the others, Loviconi and little Bernadette...

— No, mom, we do our best, and he is better than us.
She shook her head and grimaced while M. Berger watched at her, with a scandalized look.

— Well anyway, Ginette, why couldn't a little Moroccan be first in his class? You're not a racist, are you?

— Oh, give me a break! Don't say that, even as a joke. You forget my uncle who died during deportation... [...] And besides don't call me Ginette when we are among strangers.

M. Berger glanced over at Mehdi, who was on the verge of disappearing.

— Him? But he's a child!

— That may be but we are not among family. So you don't call me Ginette!

M. Berger raised his eyebrows, exaggeratedly.

— Very well, *Genevieve*. (He stressed her first name.) But all of that still doesn't explain to me why you're so shocked...
She cut him off.
— It's a question of *mother tongue*! [...]

This passage is incredibly rich thanks to the many racist assumptions and layers of argument it neatly portrays in a few lines. In what follows the excerpt above, Mme Berger begins drilling/quizzing Mehdi's vocabulary in Arabic and it becomes clear that Mehdi is much more comfortable speaking French than Arabic. (In fact, it is possible that Mehdi speaks Tamazight at home with his family rather than Arabic, a fact that Mme overlooks when she makes assumptions that the experiences of Moroccans are homogeneous.)

Mme Berger has constructed a mechanism through which children simply inherit the language of their parents,⁶⁰ and she thus assumes that, because of Mehdi's Moroccan origins, he will never achieve a level of French that rivals her own son's. Mme's perception of language acquisition is precisely the thought process that Rey Chow questions in *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience*: "Does having a language mean coming into possession of it like a bequest from bona fide ancestors and/or being able to control the language's future by handing it down to the proper heirs?" (20). While the work of many scholars and theorists has concluded that there is no such thing as Mme's *langue maternelle* (Deleuze 7), it seems as though Mme would answer Chow's question in the affirmative; she views language as a trait that is inherited and encoded in one's genes.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Jacques Derrida describes his ability to "pass" as a native French-speaker when he is writing (46).⁶¹ However, he is unable to do so orally, which

⁶⁰ Laura Reeck shows how the same assumption is made of Azouz Begag's protagonist in *Le Gone du Chaâba* (38).

⁶¹ As a Franco-Algerian Jew, Derrida explains that he could never rid his French of linguistic markers that betray these facets of his identity.

displeases him, and he feels shame in this displeasure. In the scene above with Mme, Mehdi stands in contrast to what Derrida describes because he does not perceive his French skills as at all imperfect. Instead, it is Mme who questions his ability to reach the same level of proficiency as her son. As Chow describes, the colonizer (here, Mme) induces in the colonized “an unfulfillable yearning for linguistic purity” (23) that, in Mehdi’s case, did not exist previously and will provoke a deeply-imbedded feeling of outsidersness or inability to measure up. Mme seeks (though it seems she will not succeed) to imbed in Mehdi the insecurity that Derrida describes, even though it did not exist previously.

Mme Berger, who was previously displaying affection towards Mehdi, pushes him away and reminds him that he is *Other*⁶² in both the family and in French society more broadly, and she interrupts an otherwise pleasant Christmas holiday. She reprimands her husband for referring to her by her nickname, Ginette, because she does not believe it is appropriate for him to do so in front of “des étrangers” or ‘strangers.’ In doing so, she betrays that Mehdi’s French language skills, his success in school and, by extension, Mehdi are a threat to her. She would like to regulate the distance at which Mehdi finds himself from both the family and French society more broadly. Frantz Fanon has argued that the colonized are whitened or Europeanized through their mastery of the colonial language (*Black Skin*, 112), but as Mme shows, when Mehdi has whitened himself to the point of discomfort, the colonizer can simply remind him of his lack of linguistic heritage and undo his mastery.

Oddly, up to that point in the novel, she did not have any hard evidence that Mehdi even spoke Arabic. A closer examination of the students she lists (who must not be trying hard enough

⁶² Here, I mean “Other” in the Lacanian sense.

in school) reveals that many of those children are likely not from *français de souche*⁶³ families: Kirchhoff is a Germanic name; Fetter is likely a German Jewish name; and Loviconi is most likely Italian. In fact, of the many students Mehdi has encountered at school, Denis is the only one whose name is thoroughly French. Thus, whether these children are definitively French, or grew up in French-speaking households, is unknown. Mme reduces their ability to succeed in French class to their whiteness, rather than their Frenchness.

When M. Berger accuses Mme of making a racist assumption about Mehdi and his ability to access the level of French necessary to be first in his class, she deflects the accusation. When she reminds him that her uncle was deported, she pivots away from the accusation with a shallow mention of another racist action of which she disapproved. Her deflection technique allows her to circumvent the accusation without addressing it or examining her own logic about language access. No one in her surroundings questions her further or notes her mobilization of her deceased uncle to cement her colonizing language.

Mme betrays her lack of understanding or knowledge about Mehdi in other scenes as well. For example, she makes Mehdi feel uncomfortable by insisting that he tell her what his father does for a living. However, Mehdi does not have a father figure and he feels uncomfortable with her assumption that he does (206-07). The more time Mehdi spends with the Berger family, the more he faces such awkward conversations about his biological family, food, customs, religion, and language. Mehdi's discomfort culminates when Mme Berger fetishizes his familial/socio-economic/social situation with an invented narrative about who Mehdi is and where he comes from. When she, Mehdi, and Denis are looking through a book containing

⁶³ A controversial expression used to designate French citizens whose families have been in France long enough not to identify with other national origins or who do not see themselves as the products of immigration.

images of Vincent van Gogh's artwork, Mehdi stares at Van Gogh's rendition of a pair of shoes that remind him of his father (Mme Berger still does not realize he is absent in Mehdi's life). When he tells Mme Berger that he is thinking of his father, she assumes that he (Mehdi's father) must have worn an equally worn-down pair and that, because Mehdi is Moroccan, his family is necessarily poor, and his father could not afford new shoes. Mehdi feels ashamed of her implication of his father's (and therefore his) poor origins.

Sensing his shame, she goes on to say, "Je t'assure, j'admire ton père, de si humble extraction, d'avoir réussi à mettre son fils au lycée français. Au moins, toi, tu n'auras jamais à porter des godillots aussi pourris" (233) 'I assure you, I admire your father, who from such a humble background managed to get his son in a French school. At least you will never have to wear such beat-up footwear.' In these two sentences, Mme fails Mehdi and pushes him away despite the compliment she perceives that she has paid Mehdi's father, which, in her mind, should draw him closer to her. First, she displays the degree to which she makes assumptions about Mehdi based on generalizations. She makes a leap by assuming that the pair of shoes cause Mehdi to think of his father because he, in his (presumed) poverty, wore a pair just like them that was falling apart. (Mehdi does not tell her that he was actually recalling how his father welcomed a beggar with beat-up shoes into their home for the night when that beggar had nowhere else to sleep.)

Implicit in that logical leap and in the rest of her thought is the idea that Mehdi's origins are indicative of his poverty, that his family is aware of their poverty, and that they have sent Mehdi to the lycée to change their lot in life. Mme thinks that Mehdi's arrival to the school in Casablanca is due to his father's work to get him there so he could "better" his situation. The truth is that Mehdi's father is (most likely) dead and had nothing to do with the decision that he

go to the lycée. In fact, no one in Mehdi's family desires him to be different or to become more like the French through his education. There is no indication that anyone in Mehdi's family thinks of him or herself as lacking anything or that anyone has aspirations for Mehdi. Instead, Mehdi's mother decision to send him to school in Casablanca is shown as devoid of much meaning. Mme's train of thought displays the gendered manner in which she assumes agency and decision-making must occur in the home of his biological family. Having no evidence to the contrary, Mme believes that a father-figure must be responsible for Mehdi's success and acceptance to the French school.

Mme uses the narrative she created for Mehdi and his biological family as an educational opportunity for her son: "C'est ce qu'on appelle *l'ascension sociale*. Répète, Denis" (233) 'That is what we call *social ascension*. Repeat, Denis.' She appropriates the experience she invented for Mehdi in order to turn it into a productive moment of instruction about society, class, and social mobility. Her lesson is intended to benefit Denis's grasp of the noble actions she bestows upon Mehdi's father. Neither Denis nor Mehdi has any idea what she is talking about, which becomes evident when Denis asks her if the term has something to do with skiing. The boys' have not yet been indoctrinated into the traditional Western notions of progress⁶⁴ required in order for Mme's point to be clear to them. Her intentions, however, are not lost on the reader.

Mme wants Denis and Mehdi to understand that Mehdi's father helped their family progress by sending him to a French school but, because the boys are lost as to what her argument is, the constructed nature of her views on social ascension and progress more generally comes into focus. In this short passage, Laroui's text reveals that a notion of progress is not

⁶⁴ By this notion of progress, I mean the one neatly defined by Robert Nisbit in his five crucial premises: 1. value of the past; 2. nobility of Western civilization; 3. worth of economic/technological growth; 4. faith in reason and scientific/scholarly knowledge obtained through reason; 5. intrinsic importance and worth of life on Earth (4).

innate and the objective trajectory it implies is in fact a subjective ideal held in place by social contract. While Mme's comments were meant to be flattering and complimentary of Mehdi's father, she completely missed the mark, failed to connect with him, and fetishized Mehdi's presence in the French school by turning it into the product of his father's admirable hard work. Through this dialogue, she unintentionally highlighted her own racist assumption that a French education for Mehdi would necessarily better his life.

The rest of the conversation does not go well for Mehdi or for Mme. Although it does not lead him to sever ties with the Bergers, this encounter opens Mehdi up to the possibility of detachment from them. As Mehdi attempts to correct her false assumptions about his train of thought, her tone is condescending, and she "educates" him instead of trying to relate to what he is feeling internally. He comes away from the conversation feeling as though Mme has insulted his father (235), which causes him to recall and inventory other negative experiences he has had with Mme before falling asleep that night (236). Their home and their family dynamic has grown familiar to Mehdi, but he subconsciously concludes that they are, decidedly, not his family.

In many ways, what Mehdi experiences emotionally as he attempts to integrate himself into the Berger family is paralleled by his time in school. As Laura Reeck points out in her book, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, the classroom is often cited as an important site for the education and integration of children (28). This is especially the case for Mehdi since the lycée is a boarding school, where he spends almost all of his time, and because the role of the boarding school can be read as that of Mehdi's extended family in Casablanca. Put differently, the Bergers' and his perception of his integration in their home allow Mehdi to feel better integrated at school.

At school, he feels comfortable with his academic work (194) but faces awkward conversations and social interactions. In his early days, he employs the same mimicry-to-fit-in strategy (drawn from Lacan's text earlier when examining Mehdi's experiences on the boat) while he is on the school premises:

— Je parie que t'es un *nouveau*. T'es un nouveau, hein ? Tu entres en sixième ? Eh bien, bonjour ! Je suis Sidi⁶⁵ Mohammed Khalid M'Chiche El Alami. Je suis un ancien. J'entre en cinquième.

Il n'avait pas dit « je m'appelle Sidi... » mais « je suis Sidi... ». Étrange.

— Et toi ?

Mehdi fit un effort pour parler, malgré la boule dans son estomac.

— Je *suis* Mehdi Khatib. (75)

— I wager that you're a new one. You're a new one, huh? You're going in to the sixth grade? Well then, hello! I *am* Sidi Mohammed Khalid M'Chiche El Alami. I am an old one. I'm going into the fifth.

He hadn't said "My name is Sidi..." but rather "I am Sidi...". Strange.⁶⁶

— And you?

Mehdi made an effort to respond, despite the knot in his stomach.

— I *am* Mehdi Khatib.

Mehdi does not understand why this student, M'Chiche, has used a different structure to introduce himself the one that he is used to. He observes the change but does not question it. Laroui hints at the extent to which Mehdi is lost in this Casablanca school by subtly highlighting Mehdi's lack of understanding of another Moroccan student. Despite being of the same national origins as Mehdi, this student remains mysterious. Because he uses "Sidi" to introduce himself, the reader assumes that M'Chiche comes from a radically different socio-economic background from Mehdi's. (The difference in social class is also, presumably, why M'Chiche substitutes his verb choice. The title requires him to use a form of the verb "to be" to designate his rank.)

⁶⁵ Masculine title of respect. The meaning of the title varies depending on the region. In Morocco, sometimes "Sidi" is used as a replacement for "Mulay" and is a title given to members of the Alawi dynasty who share the name of the prophet, Mohammed. In this case, "Sidi" is mostly likely used to designate this student as a wealthy Moroccan.

⁶⁶ It is typical to introduce oneself in French using a form of the verb "to call oneself" rather than "to be." Here, Mehdi is confused by M'Chiche's substitution of verbs.

Mehdi, perplexed but determined to fit in, mimics M'Chiche's sentence structure when he gives his name and unintentionally uses it incorrectly. His attempt to "harmonize" with the school environment becomes a site at which he "camouflages," albeit poorly.

In a second example Mehdi asks his theater teacher who the Moors were (the antagonists of the play they are reading). Soon, the class is laughing when Denis makes a joke about the fact that *Maroc* should be called *Mauroc* or, in English, Morocco is really "Moor"-occo. Naturally, Mehdi does not find the joke funny, and he becomes distracted by the idea the he is a Moor and of a different race than his classmates. Because the protagonists of the play battle the Moors, Mehdi fears that if he is one, he might be on the wrong side of the battle or of history. His insecurity on the subject leads him to feel like an imposter in the classroom and he imagines a set of punishments if someone were to discover his Moorish-ness. Though Mehdi is succeeding academically, the texts selected for his coursework and education make him feel like an outsider at a school where the majority of his classmates are of European ancestry.

As Mehdi moves between school during the week and the Bergers on weekends, he feels more and more distant from his surroundings. What felt very familiar and comfortable to him a few weeks earlier starts to slip away as he realizes that he will never be fully accepted. The theater club both affirms him for his oratory and acting skills (197) and holds him at arm's length. This club represents his larger family at school, and the teacher's receptiveness to Mehdi echoes the pull-push he feels in the Berger home. Therefore, Mehdi feels alone in class and begins referring to himself internally as "Mehdi le Maure" (196). He takes this internalization of his Moorishness with him on his weekend visits with the Bergers and the reader realizes that despite his efforts to integrate himself into his new environment, his comfort level at school and in the home of this French family is dissolving. His continued discomfort as he uses the same

strategies for attaining membership in this extended family of classmates foreshadows the rest of Mehdi's coming-of-age process by alluding to the breaking-point Mehdi will eventually hit.

Easter weekend, Mokhtar, the man who drove Mehdi to school months before, comes to take him back to Béni-Mallal for a family wedding. Before he departs, he tries (and fails) to moderate between his two worlds and slips back into his pattern of feeling paralyzed and mute when faced with an awkward situation. Mokhtar and M. Berger arrive at the same time and Mehdi, confused, chooses not to indulge them in their social niceties: "Eh bien, tu ne nous présentes pas ? Mehdi ignorait tout de cette opération sans doute très délicate. Comment présente-t-on les gens les uns aux autres ? Et, de toute façon, à quoi cela servait-il ?" (238-39). "So, Mehdi, you're not going to introduce us?" Mehdi didn't know exactly how to conduct this delicate operation. And, besides, what was it good for?" Faced with two men who represent two pieces of his identity, he is unable to reconcile what they represent.

In the weekend that follows, Mehdi has one last chance to see whether his family could feel familiar to him. Initially, things go well, and the setting is comfortable and more-or-less familiar: he is happy to be home; his mother greets him enthusiastically (at which point he notices that she smells differently from Mme Berger); he is excited to see his younger siblings; and he becomes conscious of how much he had missed the taste of Moroccan tea (242). However, he is mocked for his clothing,⁶⁷ and his own trepidation as he asks himself "était-il devenu un étranger ?" (242) 'had he become a stranger here?' As the wedding weekend unfolds around him, he compares and contrasts his Béni-Mallal home with his new Casablanca home. He watches the women around him dance, tries to imagine the French women he has met dancing in a similar fashion and concludes that these two environments are two entirely different worlds

⁶⁷ A common trope for children who are educated under the French system in the colonial world; see, for instance, Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*.

(244). The wedding devolves into drama and feuding between the groom's side and the bride's side and Mehdi watches from a distance as his family begins to feel less and less familiar to him.

Mehdi's dissimilarity from his environment is not lost on his family members, who think of him as odd and different. His cousin even refers to him as "le petit Franaoui" or 'Frog boy,' because in his Moroccan environment, Mehdi is seen as Frenchified. He leaves the wedding and his Moroccan home utterly confused about the events that transpired as well as his role in them. He becomes aware that he can no longer return to Beni-Mallal without feeling out of place. He experiences what Winston James, in his study of migration and the Caribbean, states about the predicament of finding oneself between home and exile. James argues that "the importance and value of home is never more appreciated than when one is in exile" but that "strictly speaking, it is never possible to return" (248).

Mehdi's experience of exile is very different from the one James describes, in part because he does not dream of home or value home when he is away at school and, although, his time in Casablanca is isolating, he never felt fully at home in Beni-Mallal. Regardless, when Mehdi attempts to return home for a brief period, James's theory about the impossibility of finding oneself at home post-departure holds true. Mehdi cannot go back to Beni-Mallal and feel fulfilled. The following weekend, when Mehdi returns to the Bergers, he cannot reconcile Beni-Mallal with Casablanca or his biological family with his surrogate family. His months in school have led him to a crossroads: what is familiar is not family and what is family is not familiar.

Familiar vs. Family: The Culminating *Apprentissage* and a Compromise

Mehdi's state of limbo, in which he subconsciously attempts to understand the destabilization of the correlation between family and familiar, does not last long. His illusions

about becoming a part of the Berger family and the larger Lycée Lyautey extended family come crashing down as the school year wraps up and his teacher club teacher announces the cast of the school's end of year play:

Elle se mit à écrire au tableau les prénoms des enfants et ceux des petits bonhommes plats qui vivaient dans les dessins.

Linus – Denis

Lucy – Marie-Pierre

Charlie Brown – Mehdi

Elle continue d'écrire mais Mehdi ne voit plus rien. Ou plutôt, il ne voit plus qu'une seule chose. Une erreur. Il se lève, s'approche du tableau et pointe le doigt sur son prénom. Il coasse, la gorge étranglée :

— C'est moi qui joue le *tagoniste* ?

Sabine se retourne et tapote la tête de Mehdi en souriant.

— Mais non, c'est Denis qui va jouer Linus. Le *tagoniste*, comme tu dis.

Mehdi ne comprend pas. Linus, c'est le premier rôle, le plus important. Or, il est, lui, Mehdi, le meilleur acteur. Elle l'a dit elle-même. C'est donc lui qui doit jouer Linus.

C'est logique. Sabine continue :

— Et toi, tu joues Charlie Brown.

Mehdi sent son estomac se nouer. *C'est un petit garçon mal dans sa peau, touchant par sa maladresse, malchanceux...* Son visage se décompose.

— Pourquoi ?

Sabine fronce le sourcil.

— Pourquoi quoi ?

— Pourquoi c'est pas moi qui joue Linus ?

La jeune femme sourit.

— Mais enfin, voyons, mon petit Mehdi... Linus est blond. Regarde !

Elle prend sur la table un exemplaire des *Peanuts* et lui montre le dessin. Le dessin est en noir et blanc. Pas la moindre couleur ! Comment peut-elle voir des couleurs là où il n'y en a pas ? Mehdi pointe un index tremblant sur la feuille de papier, l'ongle râpe le visage de Linus.

— C'est pas vrai ! Il est pas blond ! Il est... il est *rien*.

Sabine hausse les épaules.

— Mais si, gros bêta, il est blond. Et puis, regarde : c'est un ange, Linus ! Les anges sont blonds, c'est bien connu. Toutes les toiles de la Renaissance le prouvent. (258-59)

She started writing the kid's names next to the names of those flat little guys who live in the drawings on the board.

Linus – Denis

Lucy – Marie-Pierre

Charlie Brown – Mehdi

She kept writing but Mehdi could no longer see anything. Or rather, he could only see one thing. A mistake. He stands up, walks up to the board and points his finger at his name. He croaks, with a knot in his throat: "Am I the *tagonist*?"

Sabine turns and taps Mehdi on the head, smiling. “Well no, Denis will be Linus. The *tagonist*, as you like to call him.”

Mehdi doesn't understand. Linus is the main character, the most important. And he, Mehdi, is the best actor. She said it herself. So, therefore, he should be portraying Linus. It's only logical. Sabine continues: “And you, you will be Charlie Brown.”

Mehdi feels a knot in his stomach. *He's a young boy, ill at ease with himself, who is awkward and unlucky...* His face falls. “Why?”

Sabine's brow frowns. “Why what?”

“Why am I not the one playing Linus?”

The young woman smiles. “Well, let's see, my little Mehdi... Linus is blonde! Look!”

She picks up a copy of *Peanuts* and shows him the drawing. The drawing is in black and white. Not the slightest color! How can she see colors where there clearly are none? Mehdi points a trembling finger at the sheet of paper, his name scrapes Linus's face. “That's not true! He's not blonde! He's...he's *nothing*.”

Sabine shrugs. “Well, yes, silly, he's blonde. And besides, look: Linus is an angel. Angels are always blonde; it's a well-known fact. All of the artwork from the Renaissance proves it.”

In this difficult moment, Mehdi comes-of-age, his naïveté about his environment disappears suddenly, and he realizes that his European, white, counterparts will never fully look past his Moroccanness. This scene is a pivotal moment for him that stands in sharp contrast to his experiences up to this point: all year he has been told that he is the best actor in the theater club and he has received praise from Sabine for his oral recitation skills. Sabine's rationalization of not casting him as the main character in the play boils down to his physical appearance or, in this case, his Arabness. Going into the casting process, Mehdi had assumed that roles would be distributed on the basis of merit and he is crestfallen when he learns the opposite. His helplessness as he is cast in a secondary role solidifies the extent to which he recognizes his bondage as such. His French school is not a meritocracy that is color-blind and his rural, Atlas origins, his brown skin, and his Arab/Berber phenotype are what prevent him from receiving the lead role in the play.

The relevance of Denis's blonde hair and his *français de souche* origins (see page 11) comes into focus for the reader as Mehdi ironically watches Denis, his best friend and surrogate

brother, take what he believes is rightfully his. When Mehdi challenges his teacher's logic in casting Denis because he is blonde, she betrays her Eurocentric association of angels with whiteness and, therefore, of purity and sweetness with a particular race. Mehdi does not see race when he looks at the comic strip and notes that the drawings are in black and white, but that does not prevent his European teacher from seeing them in color. As he replays Sabine's description of Charlie Brown, "*He's a young boy, ill at ease with himself, who is awkward and unlucky...*," he shudders in recognition: her description matches his experiences, and he, too, is awkward in his new environment and ill at ease with himself. Laroui emphasizes the profound impact of this turn of events on Mehdi by switching into a present tense recounting of the dialogue—the reader sees everything unfold in real time.

Throughout the text, but especially in this scene, the other characters introduce Mehdi to his Otherness and reveal that they see color where he does not. As Sabine finishes her explanation with, "*Denis est comme Linus, c'est un petit ange blond*" (259) 'Denis is like Linus, a little blonde angel,' it hits Mehdi all at once that Denis, because of his physical appearance, will have access to things that he, Mehdi, will not. Therefore, Lycée Lyautey cannot serve as an extended family, despite their familiarity to him, and the Bergers, regardless of his bond with them, could never be his family.

As he realizes that his origins are a source of bondage for him no matter the strength of his newly found bonds, he turns to flight from the scene in order to cope with this newly discovered crisis; he runs out of the classroom and seeks solitude outside. The strategies he previously tried to make sense of the Casablanca/Béni-Mallal crossroads no longer suffice. He has tried remaining invisible, rejecting his family and origins, and immersing himself fully to find acceptance from the Bergers and from his school, but none of those coping mechanisms are

adequate for handling this set of circumstances. When Denis comes looking for him, he responds to the level of rejection he feels by rejecting Denis, “Va-t’en ! Imbécile ! (Ça lui a échappé. Il a insulté son ami !) Je ne veux plus jouer au théâtre ! Plus jamais ! Jamais !” (260) ‘Go away! Idiot! (That word slipped out. He insulted his friend!) I don’t want to act in the theater! Never again! Never!’ He tears the script of out Denis’s hand, shreds it, and goes on to insult Mme Berger, at which point Denis turns and walks away.

Mehdi severs the emotional bond he has cultivated with the Bergers to remove the possibility of the bondage it imposed on him. He subconsciously reaches the conclusion that he does not want to be subjected to the pull-push that this school and this family inflict on him as they simultaneously try to assimilate him into their folds and keep him at arm’s length.

Immediately after Denis walks away, Mehdi feels a new pain, true solitude:

Et soudain, une sensation atroce s’empare de lui. Il se voit *seul* mais, pour la première fois, ce n’est plus un vague adjectif, un état transitoire (une pause, du repos...), voire un bénédiction (seul sur la terrasse quand tout le monde s’agite, en bas...) ; cette fois-ci, tout a disparu, tous les adjectifs, tous les mots, tous les états, il n’y a plus d’avant ni d’après, le temps est aboli, il n’y a plus que ça : *seul*. (261)

And suddenly, an awful sensation grabs ahold of him. He sees himself *alone* but, for the first time, it’s not a vague adjective, or a transitory moment (a pause, rest...), even a blessing (on that terrace while everyone below him is stirring...); this time, everything has disappeared, all of the adjectives, all of the words, all of the states of being, there is nothing before and nothing after, time is frozen, there is nothing but that: *alone*.

From this space of self-imposed solitude, young Mehdi has to decide how he will position himself in school and with the Bergers moving forward. His strategy of integrating himself fully and seeking surrogate membership failed him, but what will he do next? Can he maintain the bonds he has created without the accompanying bondage of being held on the periphery and made to feel Other?

In a video interview with his publisher, Laroui describes Mehdi's journey as one of finding the appropriate "distance" between himself and not only the new French world that he discovered at school but also the Berger family (Edjulliard). Laroui elaborated his personal experience with the impossibility of assimilating to French culture as an outsider when asked in an interview why he chose to live in the Netherlands instead of France: "C'est un pays qui a le pouvoir d'assimiler les étrangers mais aussi de vous renvoyer votre différence. Alors, autant être vraiment un étranger, plutôt que d'avoir un statut ambigu où finalement on ne sait plus qui on est" (Le Monde) 'It is a country that has the power to assimilate immigrants but also to remind you of your difference. So, you remain a true stranger rather than having an ambiguous status and, in the end, not really knowing who you are.' For Laroui, the Netherlands represent the appropriate "distance" between oneself and one's new world.

Azouz Begag's protagonist, Azouz, in *Le Gone du Chaâba* faces a similar conflict as he struggles to decide to what degree he will integrate with mainstream French society. When this novel was initially published, the contentious nature of the debate surrounding integration led to political conversations about whether or not it was an appropriate choice for school reading lists. Laura Reeck's theory is that "it is likely that *Le Gone du Chaâba* was at once not French enough and too French, that is to say threatening in its linguistic and cultural proximity" (30). Mme Berger and the lycée, like larger French society in Reeck's theory, would like to control the assimilation process of immigrants or children from different environments, such as Mehdi. Like Azouz before him, Mehdi's coming-of-age process helps him to see that and to take hold of the moderation that must occur between both internal and external competing poles.

Initially, Mehdi has no idea as to how he will reach a compromise now that he is at this new crossroads, but his unease reflects his new level of awareness regarding his

disenfranchisement. He goes about the remainder of the school week feeling depressed and avoiding the events that transpired in the theater club. When he catches Denis's eyes, he redirects his gaze, breaks eye contact, and eliminates the possibility of a confrontation. As the weekend approaches, he fears the moment he will have to face the Bergers: "Mehdi n'avait aucune envie de se retrouver avec Denis et *ses* parents, dans *leur* maison" (264)⁶⁸ 'Mehdi had no desire of finding himself with Denis and *his* parents, in *their* home.' He once imagined that he would have access to those parents and to that home, and now he realizes he will never feel ownership of them. Laroui stresses the third-person possessive adjectives in Mehdi's thought process to highlight Mehdi's realization that he does not belong and no longer wants to. In a way, Mehdi has come full-circle: he is re-experiencing the dread of not knowing what will transpire when the school week ends, just as he did before the Toussaint long weekend. His feelings of non-belonging reach a peak as he shuts down socially and ignores anyone who attempts to engage him in conversation for fear that they will discover that he is an imposter (264).

Mehdi's crisis is resolved in a *deus ex machina* moment when, as if by some miracle (in Mehdi's mind), a man he does not recognize comes to the school on that Saturday morning to take Mehdi to spend the weekend « en famille » (264) or "with his family." Here, the guillemets surrounding the words in the text have a double effect; Mehdi is likely quoting the man's words internally and simultaneously questioning them. First, if this man used the words « en famille » to refer to Mehdi, then they reveal something about his definition of family: one that is not based on familiarity but rather on biological ties. For Mehdi, the guillemets could also signal the sometimes-constructed notion of who constitutes family.

⁶⁸ Laroui's emphasis.

The reader learns that this man is in fact a biological cousin of Mehdi's, but what is at stake is whether or not Mehdi classifies as him as family despite never having seen him before. Miloud (a school staff member) welcomes the man and treats him with respect, exchanging pleasantries with him in Arabic. Mehdi leaves with the man (Tayeb) and is greatly relieved that he will not have to face the Bergers; the school administration will simply explain to them that he left with his family this weekend. Initially, Mehdi is unsure what to think about this newfound family of his, but his previous predicament was uncomfortable enough that he does not hesitate in taking the opportunity to continue avoiding it.

Mehdi's new weekend home represents an intermediary, third space between Béni-Mallal and the Berger home. The décor is a combination of traditional Moroccan furniture and markers of the French colonial past. The conversation in the home takes place in equal parts Moroccan Darija and French and they eat a Moroccan lamb tagine for dinner. His experience there contrasts sharply from the time he has spent elsewhere, because Mehdi is able to find a balance between Moroccanness and Frenchness in this environment. Additionally, Tayeb bridges the (would be) gap between Mehdi and his other relatives with exaggerated translations that allow Mehdi to fit in and even to gain favor in this new household (268). Mehdi's aunt and uncle treat him like a respected guest by moving into the living room so that he can sleep in their master bedroom.

This new Casablanca family, that is at once biologically related to him and familiar to him, represents the internal compromise that Mehdi has reached. Mehdi's comfort in this compromise crystallizes the next day when he saves the day at a soccer match. He realizes that the teams have an unequal number of players on the field and his cousin credits him with the victory of his favorite team. At the end of the weekend, Tayeb asks him if would like to come back and Mehdi's reaction neatly distills how differently he feels here:

[Tayeb] lui dit qu'il passerait le prendre le samedi suivant. Désormais, il allait passer tous ses week-ends en famille, ajouta-t-il.

— Du moins, si tu veux ?

Mehdi hochait la tête en souriant. Oui, il le voulait. Il voulait revenir dans ce monde où on lui offrait des lits grands comme des paquebots (c'était autre chose que le petit bateau où on lui avait fait boire du Viadox et manger des cochonneries !) ; ce monde où on l'acceptait tout naturellement ; où l'on ne se moquait pas des souliers de son père ; où il pouvait changer le cours des choses de façon miraculeuse – mettre en déroute une meute de douaniers, par exemple.

Ce monde où l'ange, c'était lui. (273)

[Tayeb] tells him that he'll be by next Saturday to pick him up. From now on, he would spend all of his weekends with his family, he added.

“That is, if you want to?”

Mehdi nodded his head smiling. Yes, he wanted to. He wanted to come back to this world where people offer him beds as big as ships (which was completely different from the little boat where they had made him drink Viadox and eat garbage!); this world where he was accepted as he was; where people didn't make fun of his dad's shoes; where he was capable of miraculously changing a course of events – such as dispersing a pack of customs agents, for example.

This world where the angel was him.

The reference to angels at the end of the passage drives home the Mehdi's sense of relief and his awareness that he experienced an injustice in school and would likely continue to experience similar injustices if he chose to continue remolding himself to integrate into the world represented by Casablanca and the Bergers.

Mehdi's *moment d'apprentissage* is marked by a compromise whereby family and familiarity do not have to be distinct or mutually exclusive. The novel's argument seems to be that young Mehdi and, by extensions, other individuals living in these in-between spaces, cannot force their connections or transform their situation of bond and bondage on their own. Mehdi can choose to spend time in an environment that is comfortable to him but that also does not malign him or distinguish him on the basis of his physical appearance, Moroccanness, or rural origins in Béni-Mallal, but he discovered this space not thanks to his willpower, but rather because he allowed himself to be open to exploring a new environment without expectations.

As Franco Moretti posits in *The Way of the World*, stories or novels are often classified as belonging to the Bildungsroman genre when they illustrate the manner in which youth comes to an end. However, the genre also seems to preclude that the end of youth “has meaning only *in so far as* it leads to a stable and ‘final’ identity” (8).⁶⁹ Thanks to the end of his youthful ignorance, Mehdi develops a space of in-betweenness or a third space (Bhabha “The Third Space”) that is at once external to the binaries he resists and crafted with them in mind.

In *Les damnés de la terre*, Frantz Fanon describes the compartmentalization of the colonial world that was destabilized at the end of the colonial era but also reinforced through neocolonial projects (7). Mehdi may no longer be a colonial subject in the literal sense, but he remains Othered in European society. His coming-of-age is marked by his understanding of that fact and the end of his naïve view that he can integrate into his surroundings. However, his arrival at this conclusion also leads to a genesis: the emergence of Mehdi’s *self*.

Conclusion: La distribution des prix

When the school year is over, the extended school family embraces Mehdi for his scholastic achievements. At the end of year award’s ceremony, Mehdi is recognized for being first in his class (277), and the director congratulates him with a “Félicitations, mon fils !” (283), or ‘Congratulations, my son!’ With these three words, the director claims Mehdi as part of the family and asserts his ownership over the boy’s accomplishments. When the ceremony is over, one by one, Mehdi’s teachers congratulate his mother and suggest he pursue an education in a variety of topics: geography, mathematics, French, etc. (284). He has proven to his school that

⁶⁹ His emphasis.

his classroom abilities are superior to those of his classmates, and through his successes, convinced the lycée staff that his worthy of being a member of their community.

The school imagines itself a progressive environment and it take credit for the boys who have attended over the course of the past year:

« Hommage aux enseignants et au proviseur du plus grand lycée d'un empire spirituel : l'empire de la francophonie. » [...]

— On ne peut mieux caractériser ce qui nous lie. Nous sommes fiers de vos enfants, de *nos* enfants. Notre lycée est le symbole éclatant de l'amitié entre les peuples, de la richesse du dialogue et de la diversité. Tous ont fait de leur mieux (quelques toux discrètes parcoururent l'assistance.) Mais il faut distinguer particulièrement ceux qui se sont illustrés par leurs efforts, leur talent, leurs résultats. C'est ce qu'on appelle « l'élitisme républicain ». Ce n'est pas un oxymore ! (280)

I'd like to pay homage to our teachers and to the Headmaster of the best school that symbolizes this an important spiritual empire: the francophone empire. [...] There is no better way to characterize what unites us. We are proud of your children, of *our* children. Our school is a break out symbol of friendship between peoples, of the importance of dialogue, and of diversity. Everyone did their best (a few discrete coughs erupted in the audience). However, it is necessary to distinguish those who stood out for their efforts, their talent, their results. That is what we call "republican elitism." It is not an oxymoron!

The speech's ironic claims about diversity and friendship between peoples highlight the wedge that now exists between Mehdi and the school. The possessive adjective *nos* reappears, mirroring M. and Mme's use of *notre* and underscoring the condescending ownership that the school administration would like to have of Mehdi in light of his achievements.

However, the school and the Bergers are too late: Mehdi no longer wants to integrate himself fully into his surroundings. When he first catches a glimpse of his mother, who has traveled to Casablanca to be a part of the ceremony, he is delighted to see her (277), and he feels comforted by her presence. He is proud of how beautiful she is in her traditional Moroccan dress (284) and no longer wants to distance himself from the origins she represents.

Now that Mehdi has seen the racism with which Lycée Lyautey and the Bergers' view him, he cannot un-see it, and the impossibility of allowing himself to strive for integration or

assimilation crystalizes (285). Mehdi stands between his two mother-figures, with the option of serving as a bridge between them, but Mehdi opts for silence. His silence is no longer the dumbfounded muteness that would seize him previously, but rather a silence that is motivated by an awareness of how he has changed and of his will to take control of his existence between these two worlds (here, represented by two women). The last few sentences of the book leave the reader with not only the finality of Mehdi's change, but also the possibilities brought on by the beginning as he moves forward with his third space in hand: "Mehdi comprend confusément qu'il vient de vivre l'année décisive de sa vie. Une année chez les Français" (287), 'Mehdi understood confusedly that he had just lived the most important year of his life. A year with French people.'

Chapter Four

Familial Estrangement: The Bondage of Separation and the Impossibility of Return

Et puis, pour moi, la fiction c'est la suture qui masque la blessure, l'écart, entre les deux rives.

-- Leïla Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes : Autopsie de l'exil*

And then, for me, fiction is the suture that closes the wound, the gap, between the two banks.⁷⁰

This often-cited quotation of Leïla Sebbar's distills into one sentence one of the most prominent themes of her oeuvre: estrangement. In *Lettres parisiennes*, Sebbar writes that, for her, fiction serves the purpose of suturing over a wound and that it helps her contemplate the meaning of exile (138). She sees herself as an outsider or an exiled member of each of the social groups that could potentially claim her (Mortimer 126), which is the source of her metaphorical wound. Her novels, therefore, intentionally challenge categories of difference and highlight messages about unity and commonality while she stitches her metaphorical suture.

Sebbar's *Mon cher fils*, initially published in 2009 in Tunisia by Editions Elyzad, features protagonists who suffer from a sense of non-belonging due to the (im)migration of characters between North Africa and the European continent. Its temporal setting is never laid out explicitly, but the state of affairs in Algeria and personal timelines of the characters suggest that the novel's plot takes place more or less contemporaneously with its publication dates. It offers a series of vignettes strung together by the young, female protagonist, Alma. Alma's mother is a French woman and her father is Algerian, mirroring the nationalities of Sebbar's parents and raising a question regarding the possibility of autobiographical elements in this work of fiction.

⁷⁰ My translation.

Alma's mother left her and her father in Algeria to return to France and Alma struggles to understand why. She feels abandoned despite her mother's continued empty promises that she will return from France.

At the moment when the novel begins, Alma lives at home with her father, grandfather, and nanny-figure, Minna. She works as a public scribe at la Grande Poste where she meets other members of her community whose lives have been touched in one way or another by estrangement. The bulk of Alma's work involves writing letters that are dictated to her by illiterate members of Algerian society, most of whom write to their estranged family members who live on the other side of the Mediterranean (22). As she writes, Alma hears the stories that inspire these letters, but her familiarization with the stories is one-sided—she never learns whether or not her clients receive a reply. Her most frequent client is an older gentleman, who writes to his son, Tahar, and who is the second protagonist of the text. (He is unnamed, so Alma refers to him as *l'homme, le vieil homme, or le chibani*.⁷¹ I refer to him here as *l'Homme*.) *L'Homme* writes letters to his son, hence the novel's title, *Mon cher fils*. Alma's work also leads her to develop a professional relationship with a young woman who requires her services to write to her twin sister, Kamila. Additionally, the novel as a whole showcases Alma's relationships and personal experiences with alienation⁷² at home.

The alienation experienced by each character results in a bond between individuals on either side of the estranged relationship and it serves to strengthen a new, invisible bond between family members, which I call the estrangement-bond. Additionally, this estrangement clamps down on the characters in these relationships, often due to a fear they experience, and results in a

⁷¹ Chibani: North African Arabic for “old man” or “white hair.” Frequently used to refer to older immigrants of North African descent in France.

⁷² While other scholars may nuance the difference between the concepts of alienation and estrangement, I use them interchangeably in this chapter.

form of bondage that has tangible results on their actions. Thus, estrangement-bonds in Sebbar's work slip into and back out of estrangement-bondage and these filial connections become burdensome. The effect of this bondage is to unite estranged family members in their estrangement and to reinforce the estrangement-bond between them. Lastly, as characters learn to deal with their bondage and the estrangement-bond that exists between them and their family members, they produce new bonds and relationships with other characters who share their predicament, and estrangement becomes the source of understanding and bonds between strangers.

In each scenario Alma encounters, the distance that exists between the characters and their loved ones can be read as an allegory of historical or political events between France and Algeria. As Imre Szeman writes in a recuperative reading of Jameson's infamous essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," a novel such as Sebbar's "speaks to its context in a way that is more than simply an example of Western texts' familiar 'auto-referentiality': it necessarily and directly speaks to and of the overdetermined situation of the struggles for national independence and cultural autonomy in the context of imperialism and its aftermath" (193). The French-Algerian colonial past and struggle for Algerian independence, which both resulted in the movement of people across the Mediterranean, have left members of families on opposing sides of national boundaries in Sebbar's novel.

The themes of exile and estrangement as they are presented in Sebbar's vignettes contrast sharply from those of authors and scholars in other academic disciplines. Theorists who have studied the concept of human estrangement or alienation have often posited it as a *lack* of a bond, agency, or power. From the work of philosophers, to that of sociologists, critical theorists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts, scholars have proposed ideas about alienation and

estrangement that continually reference absence or deficiency. For example, Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist and pioneer of family therapy, characterized alienation by emotional withdrawal or *lack* of closeness (280) and contemporary social workers conceive of estrangement as a loss (Agllias *No Longer*) or a *lack* of emotional intimacy, warmth, or trust (Agllias *Gendered Experience*, 39). Similarly, Bertolt Brecht, the acclaimed German playwright and dramatist, developed a Performance Studies concept, translated as the alienation effect or the estrangement effect, by which the audience experiences a *lack* of identification with the characters in the play and by which the “natural” is exposed as a construction (Jameson 40). Despite the impact of this previous scholarship, none of these definitions are fully adequate for an analysis of Sebbar’s novel. For Sebbar, familial alienation contains the possibility of developing alternative kinship structures and therefore much more is at stake than what can be encapsulated in a notion of absence.

In what follows, I analyze the three vignettes Sebbar lays out in *Mon cher fils*, in which Alma interacts with other individuals who experience alienation. Each narrative case study nuances previous definitions of estrangement and illustrates the potential opened up by distance between family members. In the first section, I argue that Marx’s theory of alienation is crucial in order to trace l’Homme’s lack of connection, via his labor, with his son and with his “species-being” (Marx 134). However, l’Homme also harnesses his estrangement from Tahar, through his letter-writing process, to reach out to him and cultivate a relationship via estrangement. As he develops an estrangement-bond with him, which sometimes takes on the characteristics of bondage, Sebbar introduces gender into Marx’s theory of alienation via a literary study of masculinity. As a result, Sebbar’s writing pushes past the binary lack/non-lack of Marx’s theory by highlighting the productive capacity of relationships of alienation.

Section two examines a second vignette in *Mon cher fils* and I contend that, here, Sebbar uses a story of twin sisters and a similar relationship of estrangement-bonds and bondage to condemn patriarchy as the source of estrangement between women. Additionally, I demonstrate how Sebbar's female characters mobilize that same estrangement as a site of resistance to patriarchy. Finally, the third section of this chapter is dedicated to the protagonist, Alma, and her relationships of estrangement. Here, I argue that her alienation from her mother, which is unintentionally enforced by her father, has produced her individualism in her community. However, Alma's relationship of estrangement allows her to form new relationships with these aforementioned members of her community, who have also suffered from estrangement in their lives.

Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation: A Schema for Understanding l'Homme and Tahar's Critique of Him

The salient, eponymous narrative in *Mon cher fils* consists of the story of an unnamed older man, l'Homme, who tries unsuccessfully to write letters to his son with Alma's help. This vignette is the story of a worker and of the effects of his time working in France on his personal, family life. As l'Homme tells Alma the story of the professional accomplishments that ultimately allowed him to return to Algeria and retire, Sebbar weaves together the precursor to l'Homme's estrangement from his family: his alienation from himself. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx outlines his theory of alienation and concept of "species being," in which he proposes that the worker's alienation from his own essence occurs through a four-step process in capitalist societies — lack of connection with the product of one's own labor; lack of connection with the act of labor; lack of connection with human circumstances, including with other individuals (proletarian or not); and finally, lack of connection with one's own

“species being,” or humanity (*Marx Reader* 70-73, 134). Sebbar’s writing is a thought-provoking, fictional case study of the implications of this alienation process, that occurs due to wage labor, and that captures the human component of both self and familial estrangement.

The dynamic between l’Homme and Alma varies. Sometimes she sits quietly and patiently with him while he tells her of his family (seven daughters and one son), his immigration story, his experiences working in France, his repatriation to Algeria, and his current long-distance interactions with his family who remained in France. When they are talking about his family, she respects his privacy by not asking too many questions, and in each of their interactions, he reveals more intimate details and layers of his story. In these moments, Alma’s conversations with l’Homme resemble therapy sessions rather than meetings with a public scribe. At other moments, their conversations look more like a dialogue, and they talk about French-Algerian history, Arabic poetry, and worker exploitation in China. Alma earns his trust and he expects that she will keep his secrets because of their professional distance.

While he was living in France, l’Homme worked at a Renault factory. In the following passage, a third person narrator tells us of his (“il” or “lui” in the text) first meeting with Alma:

La même histoire tant de fois répétée et lui, en bleu de Chine, assis sur une vieille chaise en bois en face de la jeune fille qui vient d’arriver... Il ne veut pas parler de lui, ni de ses années à l’île Seguin, l’usine Renault grande comme un paquebot de croisière, il les voyait à la télévision, ces bateaux pour les riches, si beaux sur la mer et dedans comme un palais, un palais vu à la télé, si la télé n’existait pas, il ne saurait pas. Et tous ces pays où il n’ira jamais. L’île Seguin c’était un pays avec le bruit des chaînes et le bruit des langues étrangères, les belles voitures c’était eux les ouvriers, leurs mains avaient fabriqué tout ça, un jour ils auraient les vieilles Renault d’occasion, bientôt à la casse, comme eux, chibanis abandonnés. (17)

The same story repeated so many times and him, dressed in China blue, sitting on an old wooden chair facing the young woman who had just arrived... He doesn’t want to talk about himself, or about his years working on Seguin island, the Renault factory as big as a cruise-ship, he had seen these ships for rich people on television, so beautiful on the sea and like a palace inside, a palace he had seen on TV, without a TV, he would have no idea they existed. And all of those countries he would never visit. Seguin island was a

country with so much noise, the noise of chains and of foreign languages, they were the workers who made those beautiful cars, their hands had made all of that, one day they would own old used Renaults, at the brink of breaking down, just like them, abandoned chibanis.⁷³

Here, the prohibitive cost of the Renault vehicles he helped manufacture kept l'Homme estranged from the product of his own labor. Workers of his status aspired to owning a used, barely running, "bientôt à la casse," version of the object they worked to assemble. The process of working to assemble these vehicles turned the workers into people who were "bientôt à la casse" just like their cars. Despite touching the material vehicles with their own hands, the inaccessibility of these cars rendered them objects from an alternate reality. According to Marx's theory of alienation, the estrangement between a member of the proletariat and his or her labor is the first step towards alienation from the self (Marx 111).

L'Homme is not only "abandonné" and "bientôt à la casse," he has become estranged from the act of labor itself, which results in a lack of fulfillment. For Marx, this is the second step toward alienation from the self (111), in which a worker in capitalist society finds self-denial, mental ruin, and "mortification" instead of the fulfillment that work can provide (Marx 110). He is resigned to his situation and work in the factory because he remains focused on his vision of retirement in Algeria. He has compromised his happiness in the present in order to hopefully feel fulfilled in the future, which in the end shaped him into the capitalist's (or in this case the Renault profiteers') ideal worker.

During his time working for Renault, l'Homme encountered young, Marxist revolutionaries, but his lack of connection with the act of labor kept him imbued in what Elizabeth Freeman calls "chrononormativity" in her book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities*,

⁷³ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

Queer Histories. She defines “chrononormativity” as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” or “a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (3). Her analysis shows how the chrononormative is deployed by the state in order to form “state-sponsored timelines” that serve the economic interests of the nation-state for individual bodies (4). In l’Homme’s story, Sebban nuances Freeman’s arguments with what I call his *corporate-sponsored timeline*, that served not only the state, but also the Renault factory and proponents of notions of profit more generally. Since l’Homme wasn’t connected to the act of labor, he listened to the discourses presented by these revolutionaries, and he considered the implications of joining in their activities, but he never did:

Trois fois on a écouté le jeune, on discutait avec lui, ça lui plaisait, il avait l’air de gagner quelque chose grâce à nous, Youssef a dit “On arrête, on peut pas faire croire à Hervé, il s’appelait Hervé, qu’on va faire la Révolution avec lui, ça suffit... Il en trouvera d’autres des ouvriers, des jeunes idéalistes comme lui.” Youssef et Kamel ont dit à Hervé qu’ils partaient au pays, moi je n’ai rien dit. Hervé a compris. (138-139)

Three times we listened to the young man, we discussed with him, it made him happy, he seemed to have achieved something thanks to us, Youssef said, “We should stop, we can’t let Hervé think, his name was Hervé, that we are going to start a revolution with him, that’s enough... He’ll find other workers, young idealists like himself.” Youssef and Kamel told Hervé that they were leaving to go back to their home countries, I didn’t say anything. Hervé understood.

In her queering of time, Freeman contends that Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* fleshes out the dangers of chrononormativity’s split present, which consists of prior violence and future possibility (9-10). L’Homme’s corporate-sponsored timeline engenders the split present Derrida conceptualizes as l’Homme’s vision of the present is made up solely of past and future. In the quote above, l’Homme did not join Hervé because he spent his time in France laboring in factories as a means to an end; he did not view his work as gratifying but he did not need to because he projected contentment on to the future. His labor was not a source of happiness, but

rather it was the only path he could envision toward his retirement and relocation back to Algeria. Scholars such as Eli Zaretsky argue that “the family [...] can never be wholly synchronized with the mechanical tempo of industrial capitalism” (33), but l’Homme’s vision of retirement is asymptotic as it pushes him nearer and nearer to the impossible whole synchronization. Capitalism prevents l’Homme from escaping socially regulated or state/corporate-sponsored time and it is precisely this subservience at work and in French society that eventually led to the familial estrangement between l’Homme and his son.

L’Homme’s wage labor in a factory resulted in his estrangement from other individuals, as Marx predicted it would, in the third phase of his theory of alienation. The unfulfilling labor l’Homme performed for the Renault factory caused him to disengage from his family life and for his family to feel foreign to him, but also for Tahar to dismiss his father, to reject him, and to feel as though l’Homme were completely foreign to him. The labor that l’Homme was doing for Renault, and his resignation to his professional situation, were the primary source of conflict and resulted in Tahar losing respect for his father. In this way, the relationship developments between l’Homme and Tahar are an interesting example, or literary case study, of the effects of proletariat work on a familial relationship.

Tahar feels this distance in ideology from a larger group of individuals (mostly immigrants of North African descent) of which his father is only a part. Tahar’s criticism extends itself to a particular interpretation of the Muslim faith, to which he believes his father ascribes. He tells his father that his (Tahar’s) God is not one that demands that the faithful resign themselves to the life they have been given. Tahar believes in God, but he believes that God is just, and that if he looks to shift the balance of power, God will understand (42-43). Similarly, l’Homme tells Alma that as a child, Tahar looked up to and admired Zinédine Zidane (the

famous French soccer player born in Marseille unto Algerian parents). However, when he grew up, Tahar began denouncing Zidane for not taking an activist stance on political issues. For example, Tahar points out to his father that Zidane has never spoken up about issues in Palestine (144). Tahar's critical perspective of Muslims around him as he became an adult caused many uncomfortable conversations with l'Homme, which l'Homme then details for Alma.

L'Homme's estrangement from the product of his labor, the lack of fulfillment he felt from his acts of labor, and his estrangement from his son have resulted in a split-person who has had less ability to consciously shape his life-activity as a worker than he initially realized — physically he is in Algeria and in the present, but mentally, emotionally and psychologically, he is in France and in the past. His split person is a manifestation of the incoherence between l'Homme and himself and represents the final stage in Marx's theory of alienation: the worker is eventually alienated from his own "species being," from his sense of purpose, and ultimately from his own humanity.

At the time that l'Homme is recounting all of these experiences to Alma, he has reached the end of his years as a worker and realized his dream of returning to Algeria for retirement on the water. If Marx's criteria for human fulfillment involve man's ability to consciously make decisions about his life-activity (Marx 111) then, initially, it seems as though l'Homme has done so: his dreams have come to fruition, so he should be in a place of feeling fulfilled and satisfied with his circumstances. Instead, it is apparent to the reader that he feels lonely, confused and mentally stuck reliving the years he spent in France. In his loneliness, he turns to Alma for company and as a source of comfort because she listens to his stories as he revisits them.

Sebbar's Gendering of Marx: Pushing Past the Binary of Lack and Non-Lack

To this point, Marx's theory of alienation, which characterizes alienation as a foreignness, or as a *lack of connection*, has provided a schema by which l'Homme became disconnected from himself in a four-step process. However, framing estrangement or alienation in terms of a lack (whether that be a lack of bond or lack of connection) is insufficient to describe the estrangement between father and son in Sebbar's work; the theory of estrangement Sebbar presents in this case study calls for Marx's theories to be nuanced beyond the lack and non-lack they imagine. Specifically, the usefulness of Marx's theory runs out when l'Homme's changes in condition and behavior, as they are contemporaneous with the novel, are taken into account. These changes are due in part to l'Homme's estrangement from his son, which is capable of keeping family members united via the distance between them, and in part due to Sebbar's introduction of gender into Marx's theory. Her literary case study of estrangement provides an analysis of the implications of masculinity in this father-son relationship.

L'Homme did not consciously reach the conclusion that he had lost touch with himself and his purpose, or his "species being," but subconsciously, he adopted new behaviors and rituals as he searched for meaning in his prior decisions and his life and in order to cope with the distance between himself and Tahar in the literary present. As the title of the novel suggests, the most salient of l'Homme's adjustments in behavior is the performance of letter-writing. He wishes to use the act of letter-writing to create a bridge between himself and his son, but because he cannot write, he finds himself seated at the public scribe's office in front of Alma. The letters are meant to transmit information about l'Homme's perspective and to create understanding, but he is uncertain of exactly what he wants to say. The act of writing has the potential to write over the interactions between father and son, but l'Homme is incapable of dictating a complete letter.

In the following example, he cannot decide what to say, so he pens an invitation for Tahar to come see him and hear his stories in person:

Alma s'impatiente, « Alors, la lettre à votre fils, vous ne voulez pas l'écrire aujourd'hui ? » « Je vous empêche de travailler, c'est vrai, bon, je lui dis de venir me voir et que je lui dirai tout ce que je ne lui ai pas dit, pas le temps, pas l'énergie... Pourquoi ? Il me répondra que c'est trop tard. »

L'homme dicte, Alma écrit.

« Voilà, c'est fini, vous mettez "Ton père" à la fin, je voudrais écrire moi-même, mais j'ai peur que mon fils se moque. Vous croyez que je peux ? Vous l'écrivez sur un papier, chez moi, je copie et je recopie, "Ton père", c'est tout, c'est possible ? » « Oui, essayez, on verra. »

Alma tend un morceau de papier sur lequel elle a écrit en majuscules, « TON PÈRE ». Le vieil homme le plie soigneusement, le met dans la poche intérieure de son bleu de Chine. « On attend demain pour la poster. » (71-72)

Alma grows impatient.

— So, the letter to your son, you don't want to write it today?

— I'm keeping you for your work, it's true, well, I'll just tell him to come see me and I'll tell him everything I've never told him, no time, no energy... Why? Because he'll tell me it's too late.

The man dictates and Alma writes.

— There. It's finished. You write 'Your Father' at the end, I would write it myself, but I'm afraid that my son will mock me. Do you think I can write it? Write it on a scrap piece of paper, at home I'll copy and recopy, 'Your Father,' that's all, is that possible?

— Yes, give it a try, we'll see.

Alma hands him a piece of paper on which she has written in all-caps, 'YOUR FATHER.' The old man carefully folds it, puts it in his inner China blue pocket.

— I'll wait 'til tomorrow to post it.

This passage is the only instance in the text where a letter is nearly finished. Although the only thing missing is the closing, the letter does not contain anything substantive. L'Homme says he will wait until the next day to send it, but the reader knows instinctively that it will not be posted at all.

The reader wonders if perhaps l'Homme is using Alma as a proxy when he shares with her the stories he imagined telling Tahar. However, Tahar was present for many of those stories and it becomes clear that l'Homme is reliving his memories for his own sake in an attempt to make sense of his past and rediscover himself. Despite his failures to send Tahar a story from his

collection, l'Homme continues to reappear at Alma's office. He sits down to dictate a letter, but Alma never pens much more than the greeting, "Mon cher fils." He continues to return, as if a subsequent meeting with Alma would produce a different result, but the meetings transform into l'Homme simply telling Alma stories about his time in France.

His stories represent an attempt to reconnect with his humanity, but instead they allow him to experience the unconventional bond that still exists between himself and Tahar, facilitating what I call the estrangement-bond. In one set of stories, l'Homme recalls spending Sundays with his son and the sensation of having Tahar's hand in his own while his son smiled up at him (53). He re-experiences those moments as he reports them to Alma, and then asks her to write about them in a short letter. That letter will never be sent or read by Tahar, but through the act of dictating it, l'Homme feels reconnected to the boy version of Tahar and uses the letter to solicit a reciprocal bond from both that young boy of his memory and the adult Tahar on the imaginary receiving end of the letter (56).

The estrangement takes on a productive capacity when it alters l'Homme's behavior in the literary present and he turns to story-telling and letter-writing as coping mechanisms. Reciting the story for someone else makes it real again for l'Homme; as he calls the memory into being, he makes Alma a witness of the relationship he and Tahar had and he proves to himself that he continues to experience a relationship with Tahar. These changes in behavior nuance Marx's theories of estrangement: it becomes impossible to think of familial estrangement and non-estrangement along binary terms that frame in terms of a lack of connection or non-lack.

The same phenomenon occurs as l'Homme tells stories about the disillusioned, adolescent Tahar with whom he clashed in personality and in temperament. L'Homme recalls the Sunday that his son resolved to end their tradition of spending Sunday afternoons together (90).

Though he does not understand his son, the process of memory retrieval and reporting reproduces the familial bond that keeps him feeling in touch with Tahar and strengthens the emotional estrangement-bond that he experiences with him in the present regardless of where Tahar is now or of what he is doing — l'Homme allows his thoughts to trail off into musings about Tahar's whereabouts today (90). The bond that l'Homme has with his son is a connection that is alive and it becomes visible to the reader via their estrangement from one another and l'Homme's adjustments in behavior as he strives to deal with that distance.

At times, l'Homme's preoccupation with his estrangement from Tahar and his efforts to maintain a bond with him slip into a space of anxiety that is motivated by his need to develop an estrangement-bond that is informed by his understanding of masculinity. For example, returning to the passage above, l'Homme says, "je voudrais écrire moi-même, mais j'ai peur que mon fils se moque" (71). 'I would write it myself, but I'm afraid that my son will mock me.' L'Homme would prefer to sign the letter himself, but he attaches great importance to the reaction of his male child, fears his son's rejection, and imagines himself emasculated by a hypothetical shame. Instead of having Alma sign it for him, or signing it hastily himself, he explains that he will practice printing the letters before signing it himself. Again, the reader knows contextually that Tahar will never read the letter because l'Homme will not post the letter the following day, and even if he wanted to, he does not have an address to which he could post it. Interestingly, l'Homme's worry about Tahar's mockery of his hand-writing is real regardless, and it is visible as he imagines Tahar receiving the letter on the other end. The shame he feels as he imagines potential mocking highlights the strength of the estrangement-bond he feels with his son, but also points to something different — a site of emotional bondage, produced by estrangement, which governs l'Homme's fears.

Through the novel's dialogue it is clear that, in l'Homme's mind, all things point back to Tahar and their estrangement. L'Homme gives value to Tahar's opinion of him as a father-figure and attaches it to his status as the family's patriarch. Thus, the not-knowing Tahar represents diminishes the possibility of a fruitful father-son relationship and simultaneously wears down his masculine sense of self. The estrangement-bondage that has resulted for l'Homme due to the distance between father and son has control of l'Homme's mental capacities and constantly resurfaces in his thoughts and stories. For example, in a second scene, l'Homme arrives at Alma's workplace with good news: his seven-year-old grandson will come spend some time with him in Algeria this summer (88). The weight and burden of l'Homme's alienation from Tahar become visible in the subsequent lines as he spends little time thinking about his grandson or the news of his visit, and his stream-of-consciousness communication with Alma quickly leads him back to thinking about Tahar and the memories he clings to in his past (89).

L'Homme's fixation on his questions about Tahar and his estrangement-bondage interfere with his ability to maintain normal social relationships with others. His relationships with other members of his family, including his grandson above, point toward the manner in which his estrangement from Tahar has taken hold of him. Neither Alma nor the reader learns much about any of l'Homme's other family members, other than a few details: he has seven daughters (69), they are all married (70), they live in France and so does their mother (16), and the youngest, Hanna, was Tahar's confidant as a child and currently has dreams of becoming a doctor (69). L'Homme maintains regular contact with his other family members (69), but he is not concerned enough with them to share much about them during his letter-writing and story-telling sessions. Instead, in his conversations with his family (which he reports to Alma), his

primary concern regards Tahar's present situation — he consistently feels disappointed with the lack of answers he receives from them about Tahar's whereabouts.

Finally, l'Homme's estrangement from Tahar has control of his activities and daily enterprises. He reappears at Alma's office with a high enough frequency that when she does not at work for a few consecutive days, he becomes concerned for her safety (136). Instead of meeting with another scribe, he waits for Alma before resuming his letters. His letter-writing to Tahar is the official reason for his visits with her but this explanation is insufficient to describe l'Homme's patterns. Most of the time, Alma sits down and writes the salutation, "Mon cher fils" but the pair's letter-writing attempt ends there and their session devolves into a conversation that more often than not includes a testimonial account of an experience l'Homme had with Tahar years before. L'Homme continues to return to Alma's office regardless of their inability to write and repeats the process of beginning a letter and telling Alma a story. He cannot shake his need to revisit the Tahar of his memories and to forge the bond he feels to his son in their estrangement, and the more this need plagues him, the more it turns into a source of bondage for him. The ritual of appearing in front of Alma and the letter-writing behavior slip from a strategy for maintaining a bond with Tahar into a form of estrangement-bondage that imposes itself on l'Homme's day-to-day.

In each of these examples, l'Homme's journey to reconnect with himself has led him past the point of feeling re-bonded with Tahar and to a place where estrangement and distance from Tahar have developed into a source of bondage for him. This estrangement-bondage is a product of the not-knowing where his son is, what he is doing, and what he thinks of him as a father-figure. It is unlike his estrangement-bond with Tahar in that it produces anxiety and stress for him, takes control of his mental capacities, changes the relationships he has with other family

members, and affects his daily activities. As l'Homme attempts to re-find himself and his "species being," he becomes the captive of his estrangement from his son, and it takes hold of him. His curiosity about Tahar is his primary preoccupation, and consequently, the alienation becomes a form of bondage that has very real, consequential effects on l'Homme's daily activities.

These meetings at the public scribe's office become part of Alma's routine as well. She is the intermediary or the vehicle through which l'Homme fortifies his estrangement-bond. Her skill set as a scribe is the object that l'Homme tries to harness unsuccessfully in order to find a balance of exchange with his son. She also represents the estrangement-bondage that l'Homme gets hooked on when he fixates on his anxiety surround Tahar and loses touch with other elements of the world around him. Her position is that of a woman who moderates the estrangement bond between two men and l'Homme uses her to question and reframe his masculinity as he relates it to his role as a father. The unfinished letters she writes embody the potential, which never comes to fruition, for a reconnection between father and son that would move beyond estrangement. L'Homme relies on her presence at la Grande Poste in order to continue living his memories and experiencing the bonds and bondage he craves in Tahar's absence from his life.

The meetings with l'Homme infiltrate Alma's personal life and she thinks about him and his stories even when she is not at work. When he is absent from her office for a few days, she rethinks her motivation to continue her job: "À la poste, le vieil homme l'attend. Elle avait pensé que s'il ne venait pas après une semaine, elle ne ferait plus l'écrivain public" (28) 'At the post office, the old man waits for her. She had thought to herself that if he didn't come for a week, she would quit her job as public scribe.' Many of their writing sessions end with « À demain »

(23) because both parties know that although they have reached the end of a chapter in l'Homme's story, Alma will soon hear another one. She depends on l'Homme's trips to the post office as much as he does: she becomes invested in his relationship with Tahar and he becomes the main reason she continues this work. L'Homme's estrangement-bond with Tahar and the estrangement-bondage which affects him become the source of a new connection with someone unexpected — Alma. She shares some of his experiences with familial alienation (examined in more detail below), and a new bond that connects her to l'Homme thanks to these commonalities surfaces. Therefore, the estrangement between father and son and the bonds and bondage that keep l'Homme tied to Tahar become the source of new connections and relationships between individuals.

Estrangement as Resistance: Separation Between Sisters

Sebbar features a second of Alma's clients, who seeks Alma's services in order to write to her twin sister, in a less prominent vignette. Like l'Homme, this female client remains unnamed; Alma introduces her as *la jeune fille* and I refer to her from here on out as *la Fille*. Though *la Fille*'s story makes up the novel's secondary story, it contributes crucial arguments about the power of familial estrangement to Sebbar's work and, most importantly, teases out how patriarchy influences estrangement between women. Through their letter-writing sessions together, Alma learns a little bit about the twins' story: their father emigrated to France looking for work and they were born there (65); he decided to marry them to a set of male twins who were cousins of theirs (80); Kamila fell in love with a non-Muslim Frenchman (84) and married him instead (86); and finally, Kamila's family disowned her for this decision. When Kamila told her family of her plans, a period of estrangement began between Kamila and her family and,

inevitably, between the two sisters. Therefore, the distance between the sisters is out of la Fille's control as she arrived to her position of estrangement from her sister due to choices made by others.

Alma's conversations with la Fille engage a variety of issues that arise for women who live at the crossroads between North Africa and Europe. The story of these two sisters portrays the complexities of addressing questions regarding the veil, paternal/patriarchal authority and arranged marriage. Despite being treated as duplicates of the same person, la Fille and Kamila were distinct (77) and their differences surfaced when Kamila elected to marry a man she had met on her own. When their father found out about Kamila's decision to marry a Frenchman, he reacted strongly: "Tu n'es plus ma fille, tu nous as trahis, déshonorés... Tu as laissé croire alors que tu savais... C'est une honte... La confiance, où est la confiance ?" (86) 'You are no longer my daughter, you've betrayed and dishonored us... You let us believe even though you knew better... It's shameful... Trust, where is the trust?' His reaction is based on what he perceives as a double-betrayal. Kamila's choice to defy her father and marry a non-Muslim is the most obvious betrayal, but she also played along with her family's plans as if her marriage to the man of her father's choosing were a foregone conclusion.

Kamila created a space of agency for herself in the face of her father's power—she let him/them believe. In this way, Kamila manipulated her father's thoughts and actions, postponed his reaction to her decision, and gained control of the situation. In la Fille's recounted version of the story, Kamila had to have known that her marriage (to the Frenchman) would lead to her estrangement from her family; regardless, she struck out on her own despite everyone's expectations, implicitly chose estrangement from her family as a means of empowerment and

accepted the alienation that ensued. For Kamila, estrangement becomes a site of resistance in the face of these questions.

While it was the girls' father who initiated the estrangement by disowning his daughter, the physical and emotional separation between the two sisters remains externally enforced at the time that la Fille writes letters to Kamila. Since neither of them lives with their father at any point during the novel's plot, their father cannot be the only one who imposes the familial estrangement on them. When la Fille hesitates to begin the letter-writing session, she admits her apprehension by explaining that she is afraid someone from her family might see her. As she tells Alma that she is not allowed to enter into cybercafes where she could write to Kamila more freely, the authority that surveils her actions becomes even more apparent (72-73). While he remains unnamed as an estrangement-enforcer, the reader assumes that la Fille's husband, Lounès (87), plays a role in maintaining the separation between the two women. At another moment in the story, la Fille describes Lounès's authority over her decisions regarding her dress; she would prefer to cover herself more fully with a jilbeb⁷⁴ or haïk⁷⁵ in order to circulate freely in the city and preserve her anonymity. However, her husband will not allow her to wear these garments because he believes the additional anonymity would make it more difficult to track and censure her behavior (73-74). La Fille's story and experiences with her husband highlight the transfer of patriarchal authority from father to husband.

The male characters Sebbar includes in la Fille's life exercise what scholar Lila Abu-Lughod has called "a form of selective repudiation that depends on significant occlusions" (243). Here, Abu-Lughod is referring to the condemnation of particular progressive ideals concerning women, such as sexual independence. In *Mon cher fils*, the estrangement-enforcers, and most

⁷⁴ Jilbeb: Traditional women's dress that covers the body with the exception of the face.

⁷⁵ Haïk: Traditional women's dress that covers the body and face with the exception of the eyes.

notably the twins' father, rely on shame, or "honte" (as seen above) in order to exercise Abu-Lughod's "selection repudiation" of Kamila's decision to choose her own husband. Like the individuals whom Abu-Lughod references, la Fille's father and husband allowed the twins to be educated at the university level and to work outside of the home (84), a set of arguably progressive decisions. However, as feminist scholar Saba Mahmood has shown, "the family has become the primal site for the reproduction of religious morality and identity" (115) thanks to the promotion of secularist ideas in the Middle East, North Africa and, more generally, across the globe. Thus, the male characters in *Mon cher fils* are not amenable to the idea of loosening their grip on the surveillance they exercise within the domain of the family.

There is a sharp contrast in la Fille's stories between her view of the role of patriarchy in her life and the reader's perception of male authority over her life. Scholar Saba Mahmood has argued that women's bodies have been adopted symbolically as "placeholders for broader struggles" (114), and in la Fille's context, the broader struggle surrounds male control over women's behavior, especially as it concerns sex. For instance, la Fille notes with admiration that her husband believes in a woman's right to inherit a share of property that is equal to her brother's (75), yet she is unable to spend time in public without pressure from her husband to wear the clothing he deems appropriate; the juxtaposition of these two facts highlights the judicious nature of patriarchal authority concerning sex or the sexuality of the women's bodies.

Interestingly, men are not the only ones in la Fille's family who use "la honte" to regulate behavior and further entrench this pattern; Kamila's mother relies on "la honte" to justify disowning her daughter for marrying a non-Muslim (86). Additionally, la Fille notes that her grandmother participated in the "selective repudiation" of her own behavior by not leaving the house unless she was dressed appropriately, for fear of "la honte" (73). In the face of this

pressure, Kamila elected estrangement from these men and women and from the soon-to-be husband who was chosen for her in an attempt to deny external control of her sexual independence. (The success of this attempt and Kamila's ability to exert control of her sexual independence in her marriage to the non-Muslim Frenchman remain unaddressed by Sebbar. The global prevalence of patriarchal control over family law suggests that her success was unlikely.)

Kamila's defiance of paternal authority stands in sharp contrast to her sister's (la Fille's) actions. Despite la Fille's sadness when her father chose to deny Kamila's place in their family, she also refers to Kamila's decision as a betrayal (82), mirroring the language used by her father, and she rationalizes the family's need to cut ties with Kamila (87). La Fille went on to marry the man whom her father had elected for her (87) and satisfied his desire to organize his kinship strategically through his exchange of her (Rubin). However, she struggles to accept the distance that has been created between herself and her sister.

La Fille does not think of her efforts to communicate with Kamila as active resistance to their condition of estrangement. Nonetheless, she is controlling her husband's perception of her actions, which allows her to continue fighting the alienation that has grown between herself and her sister. Their estrangement from one another is a strong enough motivator for her that it pushes her to a point where she resists. After finishing her lengthy story about all that has led to their estrangement, la Fille turns to Alma and says, "Voilà, je vous ai raconté tout ce que je sais... Vous comprenez pourquoi je viens à la poste pour les lettres à ma sœur ? Entrez avec moi, sinon..." (87) 'There you have it, I've told you everything I know... You understand now why I come to you to have you write letters to my sister? Come in with me, otherwise...' In this quote, Alma and la Fille have walked back to la Fille's home while la Fille finished her story. As they arrive at her doorway, she finishes her story as if it speaks for itself and her need to write to her

sister is self-explanatory; she writes to her sister because she does not accept their non-communication and in order to facilitate their estrangement-bond or, put differently, her letters are an avenue for reaching out and reconnecting with her twin. Ironically, she interrupts herself to ask Alma in to their home in order to prove to her husband that she was not out late by herself.

As la Fille writes to Kamila, she tells Alma her story, and her story-telling process becomes an avenue for memory-making and for solidifying a shared history with her sister. While la Fille recounts her childhood memories with Kamila, she further embeds them (and, by extension, she further embeds Kamila) into her own sense of self. The stories help her reimagine her formative years as a twin and the manner in which sharing her experience as a twin with Kamila shaped her identity. In this way, she deepens her bond with her sister.

In her introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty addresses engagement with feminist questions outside of organized movements, “at the level of everyday life in times of revolutionary upheaval as well as in times of ‘peace’” (33). Mohanty explains that many feminist texts by her colleagues emphasize “the importance of *writing* in the production of self- and collective consciousness” but also illustrates how “testimonials, life stories, and oral histories are a significant mode of remembering and recording experience and struggles” (33). La Fille is not part of an organized feminist movement, yet her meditations on the hijab, her recollections of her separation from her sister and her inability to enter into cybercafes engage feminist questions. Similarly, she does not formally produce a written history of her feminist struggle, but she does seek Alma out and provide her with a testimony of how gender has shaped her life and the life of her sister. Her letter-writing sessions serve to rekindle the estrangement-bond she feels with her absent sister while engaging in a subtle feminist struggle as she reports her story to an outside source. Whether she realizes it or

not, la Fille's distance from her sister empowers her to negotiate her own agency with the external forces that keep her apart from her sister.

La Fille exercises a form of self-surveillance and the discretion she uses in hiding her estrangement-bond with Kamila leads her to feel enslaved by the bondage of estrangement. Her behavior in her maintenance of her connection with Kamila weighs on her and makes her uneasy rather than liberating her to feel as though she can do as she pleases. As we saw above, la Fille's meetings with Alma require her to ask Alma for favors: "Vous m'accompagnez chez moi ? Il est tard. D'habitude je suis à la maison à cette heure-ci, si vous êtes avec moi on ne dira rien, vous prendrez un thé avec nous" (75) 'Will you walk me home? It's late. Normally I'm at home at this hour, but if you are with me, no one will say anything. You will stay for a cup of tea with us.' La Fille's language is direct and assertive as she crafts a plan with Alma in order to evade the surveillance she imagines is waiting for her at home.

Her tactics are calculated and she achieves her goal, but nonetheless, her defiance in the face of the chasm between her sister and herself also becomes a source of bondage for her. While she misses Kamila intensely, her need to reconnect with her sister is motivated in part by fear. She believes that her sister is her only relative who would carry out her death wishes without judgement (74). Her worry, and not a sense of empowerment, drives her to defy patriarchal authority. In addition, while the estrangement-bond she shares with Kamila leads her to sneak about in town, she is uncomfortable and paranoid that she will get caught (72). La Fille displays her anxiety in front of Alma and behaves uncharacteristically in order to write to Kamila and subside the fears she has about her death wishes.

The effects of estrangement on Kamila or on any other member of the twins' family remain mysterious to the reader. Instead, we are left with one side of a story, belonging to an

anonymous young woman, and reported by a third-party protagonist. La Fille's anonymity has two effects: first, la Fille's estrangement from Kamila is imitated in the novelistic form as la Fille is estranged from Alma and the reader alike and, second, her story loses its specificity to her and becomes metaphorically applicable to all Algerians who have become estranged from their loved ones through similar circumstances. Therefore, the reader feels estranged from the story despite his or her insider's look into an intimate family affair, and the story makes general arguments concerning the effects of estrangement-bonds or bondage through estrangement.

The estrangement between la Fille and Kamila (and, therefore, estrangement more broadly) cannot be fully encapsulated by the lack of relationship, connection or communication presented by scholars in other disciplines; instead, the estrangement-bond is very present in la Fille's life and she reinforces it with her letters. As la Fille meets with Alma, she mentally returns to a space where she is bonded to her sister in their shared history and in their twin-ness. The bond is fortified in la Fille's consciousness as she relays her memories orally to Alma, serving as a feminist testimony due to the questions she engages regarding day-to-day issues for women.

A new connection, between La Fille and Alma, is born out of the estrangement between the twins and through Alma's engagement as a feminist witness. La Fille's alienation from Kamila produces fear, which in turn is a strong enough impetus to push her to elude the supervision of her husband. However, the behavior she acquires in order to do so results in discomfort and causes her bond to slip into a form of estrangement-bondage. While la Fille's story in *Mon cher fils* does not make explicit arguments about feminist points of contention for women of Kamila and la Fille's social position, it does illustrate the potential a single story has

for making arguments about the ambiguous, yet transformative nature of estrangement as it reproduces bonds which slip into bondage.

Separation as Cultivator of Both Bond and Bondage: Alma's Individualism

Alma's experiences with alienation are distinct from l'Homme's and la Fille's: her mother immigrated to Algeria from France and then abandoned her family there to return back to France. Therefore, Alma's estrangement from her mother is the product of an exchange between North Africa and France that fractured her familial and social community but did not change her own environment. This set of circumstances produced in Alma what Émile Durkheim describes as estrangement from society via "excessive individualism" (224). In his seminal, sociological text, *On Suicide*, Durkheim provides an exhaustive study of the factors he believed could influence rates of suicide. He argues that in order to understand suicide, individual suicides should first be classified. Among his categories, the category he calls "egotistical suicide" is the result of a pathology that emerges from "excessive individualism." Durkheim's "excessive individualism" is a form of social alienation that can be conceived of as a *lack* of social bonds or social integration (230-31).

The movement of people could lead to Durkheim's "excessive individualism" as a result of the physical distance it creates between loved ones and the fractures it causes in communities. Within the field of Francophone Studies, academics have dedicated comprehensive studies to the (im)possibility of integration for Arab/North African immigrants in France and their Beur children.⁷⁶ However, Alma's case and the isolation she experiences in contrast to her

⁷⁶ Examples include: Ben Jelloun's *Hospitalité française*, Durmelat's *Fictions de l'intégration*, Durmelat and Swamy's *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in Contemporary France*, Laronde's *Autour du roman beur*, and Rosello's *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*.

environment is not a product of her own movement away from her community, but likely grew out of her mother's departure. Her mother immigrated to Algeria from France and then abandoned her family there to return back to France.

The manner in which Alma processes her world is one of the main signs of her detachment from her environment. When she is not at work, the novel presents her either at home or commuting; she does not otherwise spend much time in public. During her commute, she is often puzzled by the world she grew up in and by the contemporary state of affairs in Algeria as she perceives it. For example, as she waits for the bus that will take her to her work, she thinks:

Les attentats on sait qu'ils n'ont pas cessé, moins nombreux mais au hasard des civils, des civils pourquoi, chacun se dit « ce ne sera pas moi cette fois-ci », mais « Dieu l'a voulu ainsi » si un éclat le blesse et le mutile, s'il meurt c'est la famille, les voisins, les amis, « Dieu l'a voulu », Dieu a voulu le jour et l'heure de la mort, a-t-il voulu cette mort là ? Et celui qui meurt ainsi, celle qui meurt ainsi de quoi sont-ils coupables ? Qui le sait ? (9-10)

We know that the attacks haven't stopped. They're less frequent but aimed randomly at civilians; why civilians? Everyone tells themselves "it won't be me this time," and then "God's will be done" if they are hit. If they die, it's the family, the neighbors, the friends who say "God's will be done." God willed that death that day at that time? The man who dies like this...the woman who dies like this...what are they guilty of? Who knows?

Here, her reactions to violence and to the threat of violence are unique: she dismisses predestination or theological justifications as an explanation for events around her and she rejects the fear that violent attacks are intended to instill in her. She picks apart the rationale of Algerians who do not think it could happen to them and she makes a conscious decision not to integrate with the social patterns she observes. Most notably, she criticizes the cultural tradition that explains events with a "Dieu l'a voulu ainsi," or "God's will be done." Alma dissects the literal meaning of the expression and asks herself the questions that she does not perceive the victims of violence and their families asking themselves. Instead of responding with "God's will

be done,” Alma asks, “God willed that death that day at that time?” and “The man who dies like this...the woman who dies like this...what are they guilty of?” Alma’s thoughtful stream-of-consciousness ideas about violence and her rejection of theological justifications for violent attacks point to her intellectual independence in an environment which she perceives as less questioning than she is.

The physical distance between Alma and her mother and the disconnect wedged between them is the most readily visible source of their estrangement. However, the *cause* of that estrangement, which is never addressed explicitly by Sebbar and remains implicit, is more nuanced. Here again, the reader’s knowledge mirrors Alma’s as both are left with a set of questions regarding Alma’s mother’s motives and the nature of their current relationship. Alma entertains the possibility that it is the decline of her mother’s relationship with her father that separates them (133). While Alma never reaches a conclusion regarding this potential explanation, Sebbar does not eliminate the possibility that Alma’s father could be the cause of the estrangement. Scholar-feminist Luce Irigaray’s work on relationships between women, and especially mother-daughter relationships, uses the story of Demeter and Persephone in her text *Thinking the Difference: for a Peaceful Revolution* to show that men, fathers and patriarchy more generally are often the disrupting source in bonds between women.⁷⁷ For Irigaray, the myth represents the ability of men to decide the fate of women, because:

Whatever the reasons cited for blaming Kōrē/Persephone, it is clear that her fate is decided by men-gods. Jupiter [Zeus], Poseidon and Hades must divide up the heavens, the sea and the Underworld. The episode of Kōrē/Persephone’s abduction involves a power struggle between Zeus and Hades... (102-103)

⁷⁷ For more on “the relationship of myth to socio-literary formulation[s] of myths,” see Gayatri Spivak’s “French Feminism in an International Frame” (163). For Spivak’s arguments about the ethical dilemma of representation through myth, see “Echo.”

Even if it is not Alma's father who holds Alma apart from her mother, the women are separated by the Mediterranean as the result of the history of conflict between France and Algeria. During her free time, Alma is curious about the history of cultural exchange between Europe and North Africa and she looks through her grandfather's library in search of his collections and artifacts from the Andalusian period. Instead, she stumbles upon postcards featuring images of North African women:

Des femmes du Sud et des Plateaux, nomades, bédouines, Tunisie Algérie Maroc et des Juives qu'Alma découvre en habit de cérémonie plastrons brodés de fils d'or et soleil doré en bas des robes, elles sont belles. [...] Alma regarde ces femmes [...] avec la même curiosité, la même attention que Lehnert et Landrock les photographes amoureux de la Tunisie, ses très jeunes femmes, ses fillettes et ses jeunes garçons. (100)

Women from the south and from the plateaus, nomads, Bedouins, Tunisia Algeria Morocco et Jewish women, Alma discovers them in their dress costumes, busts embroidered with strings of gold and hems covered in golden sunlight, they are beautiful. [...] Alma looks at these women [...] with the same curiosity, the same attention payed to them by Lehnert and Landrock, those photographers who were in love with Tunisia, with its young women, its little girls and young boys.

Alma is struck by the beauty of the women on these postcards and she notes that her admiration of them must be similar to the admiration the photographers felt in their presence. Not all of the subsequent images Alma encounters are of clothed women; some include Lehnert and Landrock's famous North African women with nude torsos which are now known for their exotification of the bodies in their images and for their ethnocentric gaze (Baetens 14-15).

By including these images in Alma's grandfather's library, Sebbar gestures at a condemnation of the colonial project in Algeria as a masculine, patriarchal one. Her literary argument echoes the work of third world feminist scholars. In the same introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* cited above, Mohanty argues that "white men in colonial service embodied rule by literally and symbolically representing the power of the Empire" (16). Furthermore, the colonial project gave birth to the discipline of anthropology

where white, male anthropologists classified the third world woman as “native” in a simultaneously sexist and racist project (Mohanty 31-32). For Mohanty, men and their bodies became the physical representation of the European, colonial and sexist project, and for Sebbar, Lehnert and Landrock embody the masculine project of sexual appropriation. While Alma could never have been the subject of these anthropological studies or these photographs (she was born after Algerian independence) she stumbles upon the remnants and legacy of this period in her grandfather’s drawer. If it is the legacy of colonialism that is to blame for the distance between Alma and her mother, then inevitably, masculine projects are at the center of that blame.

The legacy of colonialism is not the only patriarchal project at the center of Sebbar’s feminist critique. As Alma ponders possible explanations for her mother’s departure, she considers the decline of the relationship between her mother and father (noted above) and she also wonders if the civil unrest could be the source of their estrangement: “Pourquoi elle dit qu’elle revient et elle ne dit pas quand. Tu crois qu’elle a reçu des lettres de menace ? Tu crois qu’on a essayé de la tuer et je n’ai rien su ?” (133) ‘Why does she say she will come home and she never says when? Do you think she got blackmailed? Do you think someone tried to kill her and I had no idea?’ The national liberation movement in Algeria enlisted the participation of women during the struggle for independence, only to send them back into the home after independence was gained and to leave the project of nation-formation and state-building to men (Accad 238). As Alma observes the violence around her in her daily life and imagines threats of violence toward her mother, Sebbar asks a subtle question about the civil unrest and inability of Algerians to arrive at a cohesive national identity that does not require exclusion of female citizens. If it is civil unrest that holds these two women apart, then the Algerian Revolution and

subsequent masculine project of patriarchal nation-formation stand accused for the mother-daughter estrangement.

For Irigaray, whether it is the decline of the relationship between Alma's father and mother, the residue of European colonialism on the African continent, or the more modern nation-formation efforts that hold Alma apart from her mother is irrelevant; in her work, she argues that emotional distance or estrangement between female individuals (in this case Alma and her mother) is an inevitability regardless of the context. In thinking about the relationships between mothers and daughters in general, and the Western context more specifically, Irigaray argues that psychoanalysis as we know it, and more specifically the Oedipus complex, requires daughters to hate their mothers, and she asks the question "Doesn't that mean that it is impossible—within our current value system—for a girl to achieve a satisfactory relation to the woman who has given her birth?" For Irigaray, Alma and her mother would have been estranged regardless of whether or not Alma's mother was physically present, and the only solution to this problem of estrangement lies in the development of "another 'grammar' of culture" (*This Sex* 143).

Alma resists the patriarchal order that keeps her estranged from her mother and is rarely met with success. The most salient example of her efforts is visible when Alma asks Minna for a story. Minna tells a traditional Berber or Arab-Andalusian story about a prince who journeys to learn all there is to know about the ruses of women and find the ideal wife. When she finishes the story, Alma asks, "Et si tu me racontais les aventures d'une fille de roi qui veut connaître les ruses des hommes avant de rencontrer le meilleur d'entre eux ?" (49) 'What if you told me about the adventures of a king's daughter who wanted to understand the tricks of men before meeting the best among them?' Alma resists the patriarchal oral tradition and its reliance on the

conflation between women and sorceresses and Minna encourages her to write her own version of the story if she is displeased with the original. Here, Minna advocates for the work that Irigaray calls for when she proscribes the development of a new “cultural grammar” or “syntax” (*This Sex* 143) and she encourages Alma to find her Irigaraian subjectivity and voice by rewriting the traditional version of the story.

Alma asks similar questions, that resist the information presented to her, about her mother. Sebbar introduces the reader to Alma’s questions from the very beginning of the text: “Pourquoi elle est partie, un jour, comme ça ?” (12) ‘Why did she leave, one day, just like that?’; “Sa mère est partie. Elle a quitté la maison. Pourquoi ?” (15). ‘Her mother left. She left the household. Why?’ When Alma’s mother returned to France, she left Alma with a lack of understanding regarding the reasons for her departure, or the “why?” for her disappearance. Alma’s longing for understanding and the questions she asks her mother, as if she were there, are part of what keeps these women connected. The bond she feels with her mother is the product of her curiosity about her and the unanswered questions she has for her. Each time Alma asks herself or someone else a question about her mother’s departure, it is a rhetorical question, through which she reaches out across the Mediterranean and the space that separates them, attempts to reconnect, and strengthens their estrangement-bond. The question serves as a bridge between the two women and Alma uses the “why?” to imagine her mother and the answer at the other end of it. Alma knows rationally that her mother is absent, a fact which has resulted in an estrangement, but she also engages the loss that her mother’s return to France brought into her life on a different plane as she searches for meaning in their separation from one another. The result of this search is an emotional reconnection each time she thinks about the *lack*.

Alma's mother is not the only one who does not answer her questions. At home, Alma's father sacrifices her ability to understand her mother in order to facilitate the gendered silence he imposes and in order to avoid feeling uncomfortable. Each time Alma attempts to broach the subject with her father, he redirects the conversation, gives her a vague answer, or ignores her. For example, when Alma asks her father about her mother, he replies, "Ta mère reviendra," 'Your mother will come back' and when she presses him for specifics about when, he changes the subject and urges her to move on, "Elle reviendra, va ma fille, le chibani t'attend. On ne fait pas attendre un chibani" (60-61) 'She will come back, go my daughter, the old man is waiting for you. We can't make an old man wait.' Alma is unable to demand answers from him and he becomes the object that stands between her questions and the answers she seeks about her mother. He prolongs Alma's state of uncertainty and robs her of the possibility of understanding her estrangement from her mother, much like Zeus and Hades control Persephone's relationship with Demeter in Irigaray's model. Alma's father allows her curiosities about her mother to transform from a bond through estrangement, into a mental bondage that plagues her.

Alma's father denies her access to information about her mother and other matters of the past by claiming, ironically, that he doubts her interest in his answers and that the subject matter would bore her. When she presses him further and asserts that he should be able to talk openly with her because, after all, they speak the same language, he responds: "Pas toujours, ma fille, pas toujours. Parler la même langue ne suffit pas, déjà, un père et sa fille..." (59) 'Not always, my daughter, not always. Simply speaking the same language isn't enough between a father and his daughter...' Many of Sebbar's novels feature strained family relationships between members of different generations due to a language barrier.⁷⁸ The characters of those novels can often

⁷⁸ Some of these novels, such as *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère* (1984) and *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003), make the theme visible as early as the title.

communicate with their loved ones about mundane things, but they are frequently raised in environments with different quotidian languages, which inhibits deeper communication and points to cultural differences. Unlike many of Sebbar's other pairs of disconnected characters, Alma and her father share maternal languages and were raised in the same city, by the same woman: Minna. Despite these commonalities, their communication is still strained and, in the quote above, Minna's father implies that their communication is disconnected due to differences in generation and gender which, for him, are deeper reasons.

Because Alma does not receive answers from her father, she directs her questions toward Minna, her nanny and mother-figure and the woman who served as her father's mother-figure. The amount of information provided by Minna, a bit here and there but not enough to satisfy Alma, strengthens the bond of not-knowing between Alma and her mother. Alma seeks more information and is unable to get it, so her curiosity keeps her mother close by in her consciousness. Minna became the maternal presence in Alma's life when Alma's mother returned to France. In fact, before leaving, Alma's mother rationalized her departure because she knew Minna would fill the maternal role in her daughter's life (131). Alma's father's reluctance to talk with her about her mother pushes her closer to Minna for information. Minna does not know the answers to all of Alma's questions but Alma feels certain that if Minna were to know, she would tell her (100).

The reader witnesses moments of intimacy between Alma and Minna when Alma asks Minna to tell her stories. In Minna's stories about her childhood, Alma learns that Minna's potential bond with her own mother was frustrated by the birth of a son (123). The arrival of a male child led young Minna to feel she had been replaced, and again a male figure disrupts the bond or relationship between two female characters. When asked what she finds beautiful in life,

Alma responds with a list of moments or activities which all involve Minna: “Moi ? Je ne sais pas. C’est comme vous. J’aime aussi les gâteaux de Minna, la cuisine de Minna, aller au marché avec elle, je porte le couffin, c’est elle qui choisit les fruits, les légumes, j’aime les aubergines à la tomate et la chorba et tout ce que fait Minna, à la maison” (110-11) ‘Me? I don’t know.

Similar things to you. I also like Minna’s cakes, Minna’s cooking, going to the market with her, I carry the basket and she picks out the fruits and the vegetables, I like the eggplant with tomato sauce and the soup and all of the food Minna makes at the house.’ Alma’s list of the things in which she finds beauty includes Minna’s name three times. She loves all of the food Minna prepares, but also the moments they spend together doing banal activities such as shopping for vegetables. Alma cares deeply about Minna and the connection they share, which is the product of an affectionate mother-daughter-like bond.

Above, the bond between Alma and Minna, which is founded on the loss created in the absence of Alma’s mother and which has grown through shared experiences, comes into focus. Despite not being related by blood, the pair has created an alternative kinship structure where they interact as family and benefit from a comfortable and loving relationship. The stories Minna shares with Alma about her own childhood and past help reinforce a bond between them that is based on shared experiences. Therefore, in the wake of the estrangement both characters have experienced, the possibility of a new, deeper bond between them emerges and is solidified. Sebbar reminds the reader of the many ways in which estrangement and familial alienation can express itself; the history that connects France and Algeria, and Europe and North Africa more broadly, has led to heartbreaks of many varieties and during many different periods of time.

Even when she is at home, at ease in the private sphere of her life with Minna, Alma carries the emotional burden of the estrangement she witnesses among her clients:

Alma pense au fils du chibani. Ce monologue, comme une leçon du fils au père. Ces mots qui blessent, la violence de la parole, un flux irréprensible, ressentiment, révolte contre les siens et les autres, la fausse compassion, ce fils qu'elle ne verra pas, elle le voit debout face à son père plus grand que lui, la colère de ses yeux bleu-violet, la patience du père, il ne baisse pas les yeux mais le regard écoute le fils sans le regarder. À cette minute où elle imagine le père et son fils luttant contre le silence, elle pense que le fils n'écrira pas à son père parce qu'il vit dans un monde inaccessible au père, Alma ne pense jusqu'au bout de sa pensée cette fois-là. Elle entend Minna qui l'appelle.

« Ta mère a téléphoné. Ton père n'était pas là, elle a dit qu'elle arrive bientôt. Elle rappellera. »

« Tu lui as demandé quand ? » « Bientôt. » « On va l'attendre jusqu'à quand ? » « Jusqu'à son retour, tu le sais. » « Et pourquoi personne ne veut me dire pourquoi elle est partie ? » « Elle te dira, demande-lui. » « Je ne lui demanderai rien. » (120-121)

Alma thinks about the old man's son. That monologue, like a lesson from son to father. Those words that sting, the violence of his words, like a river that can't be dammed, resentment, revolt against everyone, false compassion, this son who she will never meet, she sees him standing in front of his father, anger in his blue-violet eyes, the father's patience, he doesn't look down but instead fixes his gaze on his son, hearing him without listening. Right then, as she thinks about father and son fighting the silence around them... Alma doesn't finish her thought this time. She hears Minna calling her.

—Your mom called. Your dad wasn't here, she said she would be here soon. She'll call back.

—Did you ask her when?

—Soon.

—How long are we going to wait for her?

—Until she returns. You know that.

—And no one ever wants to tell me why she left?

—She'll tell you. Ask her.

—I won't ask her anything.

Initially, in the passage above, Alma is thinking about her interactions with l'Homme, which took place at la Grande Poste. However, Alma processes this interaction away from work and the words "this time" indicate to the reader that this train of thought is not isolated for Alma: "Alma ne pense jusqu'au bout de sa pensée *cette fois-là*" (120)⁷⁹ 'Alma doesn't finish her thought *this time*.'

⁷⁹ Emphasis added.

In her study of intimacy and governance, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*, Elizabeth Povinelli shows how stranger sociality and individualism emerge from estrangement. She writes that individuals with lived experiences of estrangement “must learn to depend on stranger sociality in their everyday lives [...] and to reflect on their lives in terms of their own individual progress” (93). In a particularly poignant illustration, she describes Aboriginal theories of solitude which posit that “the severe isolation of the subject, is seen as the root cause and consequence of states of sorrow and jealousy and their subsequent geo-physical catastrophes” (43).

Because they share in the affective space produced by estrangement, Alma and l’Homme are connected via this stranger sociality. It combines with her work listening to his story and crafting the letters that may or may not (but surely won’t) reconnect him to his son to create a form of mental bondage. She relates to her work on a personal level as she listens to the familial estrangement experiences of her clients through their dictated letters and, therefore, she retraces stories like l’Homme’s over and over. Because the stories resonate with her due to her own estrangement, Alma’s professional conversations with l’Homme and with la Fille indirectly strengthen the estrangement-bondage she is living with her mother.

In his introduction to Durkheim’s *On Suicide*, Richard Sennett describes a second of Durkheim’s categories of suicide, which Durkheim calls “anomic suicide.” Sennett describes “anomie” as resulting from a sense of emptiness or lack of purpose, produced by an estrangement from the self (xxii). Durkheim argues that the best way to reduce this category of suicide resulting from lack of purpose is by strengthening the sense of belonging for individuals in group dynamics, and especially professional ones. Alma’s case is a literary example of this sociological argument; she does not work with colleagues who could provide her with this group

dynamic, but her work as a scribe does lead her to encounter other individuals who have experienced familial estrangement. Unlike l'Homme's labor in the Renault factory, Alma's work as a scribe allows her to experience an affective relationship to her work, which produces a gendered or queered unbound time that is external to and resistant of chrononormativity (Freeman, *Time Binds* 5).

The irony of Sebbar's passage above lies in the fact that Alma's estrangement-bondage, which cannot be characterized by a lack because of the manner in which it continues to be reinforced, aids her sense of purpose and undoes the possibility of "anomie" for her. Despite the bondage pattern it holds her in, her confusing relationship with her mother helps her find fulfillment in her work because it permits her to relate to it personally. The shared experience of estrangement-bondage with her clients allows her to produce new bonds of shared experience between herself and the individuals who seek her services.

The bond between Alma and her mother is transformed into a form of bondage as Alma's limbo causes her to postpone addressing the emotional manifestations of her mother's absence. Alma's mother remains present in her absence and Alma is unable to shed the weight of her curiosity about her. Near the end of the passage above, Alma is brought out of the burdensome mental replay by the sound of Minna's voice. The call reminds Alma that she does not know all that she wants to know about her mother and that in her conversation with Minna, she receives inadequate answers to the questions she poses. The reminder brings Alma's mother to the forefront of her consciousness and the possibility of a mother-daughter bond devoid of estrangement becomes visible. She longs to know more about her, which simultaneously aids her sense of belonging in the space she shares with l'Homme of bondage via estrangement and forestalls her access to her mother (Freeman, "Queer Belongings" 297). Alma learns that her

mother has promised to return again and Alma's estrangement-bondage is perpetuated. She remains hopeful that her mother will in fact return, but the bridge between mother and daughter is never realized and it fades into her sub-conscience until the next phone call or postcard arrives.

In *Mon cher fils*, Sebbar aligns characters with distinct francophone backgrounds who all suffer from the emotional exile she describes in *Lettres parisiennes* to drive home the theme that characterizes so much of her work — “francité” or commonality across generational, gendered, racial or national boundaries (Oscherwitz 196). She presents unique *post*-postcolonial literary arguments about estrangement through the discursive practice of writing. Instead of imagining estrangement as a *lack* of one thing or another, Sebbar reframes it in order to argue that estrangement should be conceived of as a real, present force that both indirectly and directly impacts individuals on either side of an estranged relationship. *Mon cher fils* offers characters, affected by the estrangement produced by tumultuous colonial pasts and postcolonial projects, who have developed alternative family structures in the face of their alienation from loved ones. Throughout the novel, their restructuring of traditional kinship results in feminist sites of resistance.

Conclusion: An Impossible Return

At the end of her novel, Sebbar leaves the reader with more questions than answers. These questions surround the notion of an “impossibility of return,” which is characteristic of novels that feature immigrant narratives. In each vignette of Sebbar's novel, at least one character in the estrangement-bond relationship finds it impossible to return from wherever he or she has arrived. For l'Homme, the difficulty lies in returning psychologically and emotionally from France, despite having returned to Algerian soil physically. In la Fille and Kamila's

example, the twin sisters cannot return to the pre-estrangement relationship they shared despite la Fille's longing to reconnect. Fear of patriarchal retribution prevents them from cultivating a relationship beyond one of estrangement in spite of the empowerment they carve out for themselves through the novel. Finally, Alma is held in an estrangement-bond with her mother because, despite her mother's continued promises to return to Algeria, she is unable to find it in herself to return to her. On the last page of her novel, Sebbar challenges the reader by putting a spin on this common thematic trope. L'Homme tells Alma that he has learned that his son, Tahar, quite literally cannot return:

[Le chibani] devant la Grande Poste. Alma envoie des messages dans un cybercafé. Le chibani s'installe, il guette l'arrivée de l'écrivain public.

Alma l'écoute.

« Hanna, ma fille, m'a dit pour mon fils. Je ne sais pas si je le reverrai un jour, j'ai peur qu'ils le gardent des mois, des années et le jugement ? Est-ce qu'il y aura un jugement, est-ce qu'il aura un avocat ? Pourquoi il est là-bas prisonnier ? Hanna dit qu'elle ne sait pas. Comment elle l'a appris ? On l'a arrêté, dans quel pays ? Il avait dit à sa sœur qu'il irait soigner des Frères, quels Frères ? Où ça ? Il est prisonnier.

“Combattant-ennemi.” C'est comme ça qu'on les appelle.

À Guantanamo. » (151)

The old man is in front of the Grande Poste. Alma is sending emails in a cybercafe. The old man sits, he waits for the arrival of the public scribe.

Alma listens to him.

—Hanna, my daughter, she filled me in on my son. I don't know if I will see him again, I'm afraid they'll keep him for months, years without trial. Will he get a trial, a lawyer? Why is he a prisoner over there? Hanna says she doesn't know. How did she find out? Where, in which country, did they arrest him? He had told his sister that he would go look after Brothers, what Brothers? Where? He is a prisoner. “Unlawful combatant.” That's what they call them. At Guantanamo.

Here, Sebbar leaves her audience with both an end and a beginning for l'Homme and, by extension, for the other characters who could face a similar outcome in their estranged relationships. With the news of Tahar's imprisonment, the source of l'Homme's estrangement from him changes, and the possibility of closure is presented. Will l'Homme be able to draw himself fully back to Algeria now that he knows where Tahar is? Or, in other words, will Tahar's

inability to return facilitate his father's return? Will this news shape the bond of estrangement and bondage that both distances him from and connects him to his son? And more generally, what would each character need, in the tumultuous climate of current Franco-North African relations, in order to move beyond his or her perpetual status of estrangement? For Sebbar, the answer to that question lies in the suture over her estrangement-wound: her writing. Through her writing, she empowers readers to search for their own metaphorical sutures⁸⁰ and, with her upending of beginning and end, asks her reader whether "time 'binds' [...] history's wounds" (Freeman 7).

⁸⁰ See Huston and Sebbar's *Lettres parisiennes : Autopsie de l'exil* for more on Sebbar's impressions of writing as a suture, or its healing power for her.

Epilogue **On *Becoming* and Becoming Family**

This dissertation is primarily concerned with the alternative definitions of family provided to us by authors who imagine the transnational/cultural family. To this point, we have seen a few examples of the various methods in which the novels examined in this corpus stretch the boundaries of family with non-normative, non-nuclear familial structures. Each of these cases contributes insight into the philosophical quandary: what does it mean to be family? Perhaps this question is best answered by moving away from the language of *being* and replacing it with a theory of *becoming* family; after all, to *be* family would reduce it to the binary of family vs. not-family or to a non-agentic space in which family is constrained and unable to transform fluidly. In what follows, I outline a few theories of *becoming*, tie them to the work in this dissertation, and ask what they might contribute to future studies of family.

In her famous existentialist text, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), translated as *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir posed the question “what is woman?” and answered it by describing the manner in which *woman* is defined in opposition to or in relation to *man*. In showing how *woman* is a minority position that is dependent on *man* in order to be established as a category, she drew the reader’s attention to the mechanisms that minoritize *woman*. She also penned her famous phrase, “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient,” (13) ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman’ (283) and kicked off what is now known as a feminist theory of sex-gender distinction, in which gender is shown to be a social and historical construct. According to Beauvoir, one becomes a woman as one is educated and socialized into the gendered role of woman. Her

scholarship has influenced the work of scholars such as Candace West and Don Zimmerman, who co-wrote “Doing Gender” and outlined that the category of sex is established based on genitalia and chromosomes, whereas gender is made up of performance or a series of acts that are considered appropriate for an individual’s sex.

Beauvoir’s famous assertion is useful in an analysis of the gender roles assigned to the protagonists in this study. Most notably, in chapters one and four, we saw how Fikria and Alma struggled to carve out moments of agency within the confines of the spaces socially assigned to them in Algeria. Can we modify Beauvoir’s phrase and say that one is not born into a family, but rather develops, family? This phrase would certainly open up a space for Kath Weston’s “choosing” of family that is not defined by or limited to genetic or biological ties. That being said, the experiences of characters in the novels analyzed in this dissertation also provide evidence for the assertion that *becoming family* is not a linear process that moves away from *not-family* and towards *family*. To say that family develops according to social parameters instead of biological ones, and to leave it at that, would be an over-simplification of the forces we have seen at play throughout this study.

In 1980, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari published their co-authored text, *Mille Plateaux : Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, which would be translated as *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* in 1987. Their philosophical reflection on the notion of *becoming* and *becoming woman* was radically different from Beauvoir’s before them. In their notion of *becoming*, Deleuze and Guattari ask women to evade “the great dualism machines,” which would hold male/female and man/woman in opposition to one another, rather than confronting them. Where Beauvoir denounces the social forces that have led to the definitional dilemma in which *woman* relies on *man*, Deleuze and Guattari would point out that her framework only

results in an emphasis of the binary or duality. Deleuze and Guattari argue for a feminist intervention that is rhizomatic, contagious, and molecular (276).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, *becoming* is not about beginnings and ends, or about linear progressions; instead it is about “modes of expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling” (239); it dissolves categories of sex and sexuality along binary lines by offering “the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings” (278) and it “short-circuits the self-evident identity of man” (Colebrook, “Introduction” 12). While Deleuze and Guattari’s theories on *becoming* have been met with intense skepticism,⁸¹ they have also reinvigorated feminist lines of inquiry in the scholarship of individuals such as Claire Colebrook (sited above) and Rosi Braidotti.

Deleuze and Guattari’s *becoming* offers a way of thinking about family that avoids the binary of being or not being. A rhizomatic model for understanding family would allow the protagonists examined in this dissertation to develop familial relationships that spring from outside of the linear or the normative. For example, we saw how Fikria looked to Ourdhia for sources of familial bond in chapter one, and how Mehdi’s ideas about who made up his family shifted numerous times throughout chapter three. When examined alongside the stories of these transnational/cultural characters, Deleuze and Guattari’s *becoming* opens up more creative possibilities, wherein the development of family ties is a combination of organic connections and intentional efforts. However, as each of the protagonists taught us, family is also not a category that is always completely within our control; at times, the social forces that constrain us in their imaginary of a family that is only and always nuclear and normative will produce bondage. Thus, the power of the mainstream family unit cannot be ignored.

⁸¹ See Grosz and Jardine for examples.

Borrowing from Irigaray (who branched off of Beauvoir's sex-gender distinction to develop ideas about sexual difference) and Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti returns to the notions of sexual difference and of becoming woman in "Becoming Woman: or Sexual Difference Revisited." She argues that Deleuze never addressed an important tension in his theory of *becoming woman*:

Deleuze's work displays a great empathy with the feminist assumption that sexual difference is the primary axis of differentiation and therefore must be given priority. On the other hand, he also displays the tendency to dilute metaphysical difference into a multiple and undifferentiated becoming. (47)

Braidotti addresses this tension directly by combining Deleuze's feminist project with Irigaray's. She argues that Deleuze overlooks the fact that, "in order to announce the death of the subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one" (51). She, therefore, articulates a Deleuzian theory of *becoming* that is not "reactive" (53) to the binaries Deleuze opposes, but that is still grounded in the material reality of gendered exclusion.

Braidotti's theory of *becoming* is perhaps the most fitting if we seek to ask what the experience of *becoming family* is like for each of the protagonists examined here. The families of my corpus have imagined new models of family, but before being given the ground on which to articulate new notions of family, their transnational/cultural familial experiences need to be recognized as such and validated by the cultural norms that might undermine them. In other words, the material reality of social definitions of family and the exclusions in which they result must be taken into consideration when asking what it means to *become family*. While the project of finding spaces for understanding the transnational/cultural family is far from over, it is the aim of this dissertation, which also asks: in retrospect, what can the transnational/cultural families of this study tell us about theories of *becoming*?

In chapter one, Nina Bouraoui destabilized normative assumptions about mother-daughter relationships in patriarchal societies by showing how gender bonds and bondage are deeply enmeshed. She also proposed a vision of female solidarity that comes from outside of the family. Using his protagonist Azouz in chapter two, Azouz Begag taught us that divorce can be mobilized as a site of creative potential and is not necessarily the destructive force that nuclear family models would make it out to be. His experiences with *saudade* illustrated the manner in which the family experience is always *becoming*, both haunted by the past and constantly unfolding in a multiplicity of directions. Chapter three showed us that family and familiar, despite their linguistic proximity, are concepts that are not always mutually-inclusive. Mehdi exercised perhaps the most creative autonomy of any of the protagonists in cultivating a new familial experience for himself but found that he would always be limited by real-world forces such as his race, class, and nationality or, the bondage of his origins. Finally, in chapter four, Leïla Sebbar developed a theory of familial estrangement, illustrated by Alma and l'Homme, wherein estrangement is more than the lack we imagine it to be. For Sebbar, estrangement is also a site of creative potential, that has the ability to facilitate familial relationships rather than disrupting them. All in all, each of these authors and protagonists has a lot to say about what it means to *become family*, and I look forward to developing my analysis of their voices further in years to come.

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