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Melancholic epistolarity : letters and traumatic exile in the novels of three Francophone women

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MELANCHOLIC EPISTOLARITY: LETTERS AND TRAUMATIC EXILE
IN THE NOVELS OF THREE FRANCOPHONE WOMEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
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in

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by
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ABSTRACT

In her 1982 groundbreaking work on the epistolary form in novels, Janet Gurkin Altman gives a working definition of epistolarity which will be a guiding concept for this project; she defines it simply as: “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning...” (Altman 4). Of course, to create meaning is a complicated endeavor. How does one create meaning from the letter’s formal properties? The contemporary authors who engage with epistolarity do so on several levels from the thematic to the structural. From novels that have several characters engaging in letter dialogues to one-sided exchanges that bear more resemblance to a diary than to a series of letters to a correspondent, the epistolary genre pushes the boundaries of public and private and creates questions about audience and intent that are not present in other forms.

Within the last half century, the epistolary narrative has re-emerged in the works of marginalized authors from various linguistic and national backgrounds. Taking tropes from earlier epistolary texts, these contemporary authors create texts that maintain the intimate feel of earlier novels while also changing the genre to demonstrate their knowledge of trauma, exile, and psychoanalysis, an awareness that has permeated Western consciousness in the twentieth century. In the body of this project, I discuss epistolary novels by three very different authors: Gisèle Pineau’s *L’Exil selon Julia*, Linda Lê’s *Lettre morte*, and Amélie Nothomb’s *Une forme de vie*. Despite being from different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, these authors share two common interests: the French language and the use of the epistolary form. Additionally, these authors have all had a traumatic experience of diaspora and/or exile that has shaped their development as writers. Using Freudian theories of ego, melancholia, and narcissism, I contend that the self-reflective nature of the epistolary narrative is particularly conducive to exploring the psychological difficulties that result from this traumatic exile.

Specifically, in the texts that I examine, writing letters becomes a melancholic act in which the letter writer seeks to reconnect nostalgically with a past that never existed.

INTRODUCTION

I. Epistolarity

In her 1982 groundbreaking work on the epistolary form in novels, Janet Gurkin Altman gives a working definition of epistolarity which will be a guiding concept for this project; she defines it simply as: “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning...” (Altman 4). Of course, to create meaning is a complicated endeavor. How does one create meaning from the letter’s formal properties? The contemporary authors who engage with epistolarity do so on several levels from the thematic to the structural. From novels that have several characters engaging in letter dialogues to one-sided exchanges that bear more resemblance to a diary than to a series of letters to a correspondent, the epistolary genre pushes the boundaries of public and private and creates questions about audience and intent that are not present in other forms. The letter writer’s innermost thoughts become known to both the addressee within the exchange and the larger audience for whom the novel’s author writes. The letter’s intimate nature has made the epistolary novel fertile ground for self-exploration for many women writers. Many scholars have analyzed the letter as self-reflective enterprise during the height of the feminine letter novel’s popularity. However, within the last half century, the epistolary narrative has re-emerged in the works of marginalized authors from various linguistic and national backgrounds.

Despite the preponderance of new epistolary works, critics have done little comparative work that takes into account the thematic convergence that frequently occurs in these texts. Taking tropes from earlier epistolary texts, these contemporary authors create texts that maintain the intimate feel of earlier novels while also changing the genre to demonstrate their knowledge of trauma, exile, and psychoanalysis, an awareness that has permeated Western consciousness in the twentieth century. In the body of this project, I will examine epistolary texts by three very different authors: Gisèle Pineau’s *L’Exil selon Julia*, Linda Lê’s *Lettre morte*, and Amélie

Nothomb's *Une forme de vie*. Despite being from different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, these authors share two common interests: the French language and the use of the epistolary form. Why would authors with such different perspectives choose a seemingly antiquated subgenre as an expressive outlet? I contend that the self-reflective nature of the epistolary narrative is particularly conducive to exploring psychological difficulties; specifically, in the texts that I will examine, writing letters becomes a melancholic act in which the letter writer seeks to reconnect with a past that never existed.

Looking at the history of epistolary narrative, seventeenth-century readers did not understand epistolarity in the way that modern readers do because readers in that time period believed that all letter collections were in fact works of non-fiction that showed real people in actual conflicts. Critics have since come to understand that texts like *Lettres portugaises* were entirely fictional, but seventeenth-century readers would have read the letters as true and would have thought they were written by a nun named Mariane rather than a nobleman named Guilleragues. Additionally, seventeenth-century readers developed a new fascination with actual correspondence from the period's most famous writers, philosophers, and *salonnières*. In fact, during this period, the reading knew authors such as Madame de Sévigné¹ and Madame de Villedieu² due to the women's letter-writing capabilities. Correspondence written by noted letter-

¹ Madame de Sévigné (1626-1696) is the most famous of the *épistolières*. Many critics consider her one of the premier French writers of the seventeenth century. She is famous for her published correspondence, most of which she wrote to her daughter. Sévigné is a particularly interesting case because she was already a public figure before her letters were officially published. She already had a developed a public following for her letters as people passed them around and read them aloud at gatherings; her letters reflect a public persona. For more on Madame de Sévigné, consult: Mossiker, Frances. *Madame de Sévigné: A Life and Letters*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.

² Madame de Villedieu/Marie-Catherine Desjardins (1640-1683) was a playwright and novelist. She has come to be included in discussions about letters due to a particularly unfortunate series of events. Villedieu had a passionate love affair with Antoine de Boësset, but he eventually married another woman despite promising to marry Villedieu. Struggling with his debts, he sold the love letters that Villedieu wrote to him to the publisher Claude Babin. For more on Madame de Villedieu, consult Kuizenga, Donna. "Marie-Catherine Desjardins." *Dictionnaire des femmes de l'ancienne France*. SIEFAR (Société internationale d'études de femmes d'ancienne régime). Mar. 2013. Web. May 19 2013.

writing women of the time like Madame de Sévigné was highly stylized, and Sévigné was selective in her self-portrayal³.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the continued rise of the epistolary text coincided with the development of the novel. While period scholars initially considered the novel to be a lesser form, the letter novel developed into an immensely popular subgenre despite these elitist attitudes. One can attribute the popularity of epistolary texts to many sources including the voyeuristic nature of the text and the fascination with letters as a mode of communication. However, with this access came limiting associations among women, letters, and overpowering emotion. In addition, Katharine Ann Jensen notes that male authors responded to the growing demand for “natural” and “authentic” letters by women by creating female letter writers who fulfilled the readers’ expectations of passion and amorous discourse: “Her [woman’s] natural affinity for writing love bound women...to a single and ‘nonliterary’ genre – the love letter...” (*Writing* 3). Because of this widely held perception, the contemporary audience had certain expectations of the female epistolary voice. Even as female authors and letter writers wrote texts that deviated from this amorous pattern, male authors adhered to the pattern in many of their texts. Because of the supposed authenticity of letter texts, reading audiences viewed the female epistolary voice as representative of women’s actual experience, not as fictional or stylized

³ In *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, Dena Goodman notes the increasing importance of letter writing in French culture of the period:

Letter writing is an ancient cultural practice, but in the seventeenth century it began to significantly with the spread of literacy; the development of state postal services and international postal unions; and the increased movement of people and goods through trade, travel, colonialism, and government service. Furthermore, as literary historians have shown, starting around 1660, French cultural theorists distinguished letters from other forms of writing and associated them specifically with elite women they called “ladies.” Whereas all writing had previously been considered primarily a male occupation, letter writing now entered the repertoire of cultural practices that these elite women were expected to master, even as it was assumed to flow effortlessly from their nature. No matter what the aspirations of the parents for their daughters, instruction in letter writing would be necessary; it was part of the equipment of a modern woman and a primary means of social mobility. (1-2)

female voices that the authors created to serve their textual purposes. Despite the seventeenth century preoccupation with authentic letters, eighteenth-century authors began exploring the fictional possibilities that letter narratives provided through the novel form.

In many epistolary novels, the love or seduction letter plays a significant role. In these novels, there is an exchange takes place where the reader sees letters from both correspondents. The two lovers can speak to each other of their love or a seducer can use dubious means to manipulate a woman into bed; in both cases, the reader has a different experience from a reader who only experiences the exchange through the eyes of one writer. In the context of the French epistolary tradition, one-sided letter novels were often the work of women. However, the most famous one-sided text, *Lettres portugaises*, was written by a man, Gabriel de Guilleragues. In *Lettres portugaises*, Mariane, a Portuguese nun, writes five tortured letters to a French *chevalier* who was her lover but who has abandoned her. Guilleragues is by no means the first author to explore letters written by abandoned women; this trope has its origins in the poetry of Ovid and in his *Heroides*⁴. Taking these heroines as the template, Guilleragues creates Mariane; she fixates on the loss of her beloved *chevalier* and appears to be having a mental breakdown throughout the course of her letters. She alternates between desperately declaring her love, chastising him for his lack of love for her, and chastising herself for questioning his devotion. By the end of the text, her purpose in writing becomes clear. She does not write with the purpose of resolving any

⁴ Linda S. Kauffman describes this poetic work in her book *Discourses of Desire*: In Ovid's *Heroides*, fifteen heroines write to an invisible other who has seduced, betrayed, or simply left them behind. Each letter is a confrontation, a demand, a plea, a lament: if the beloved were present, there would be no need to write. In the act of writing, however, presence becomes problematical; what, after all, does it mean to be "present" to one's beloved? If he truly loved when he was present, how could he bear to be absent now? Each epistle repeats the pattern: the heroine challenges the lover to read her letter, rages against the forces that separated them, recalls past pleasures, speculates about his infidelity, laments his indifference, and discusses the sole act that engages her in his absence: writing. In many of the epistles, the heroine considers ending her life, but she avoids every sort of closure and dedicates herself to nurturing her illusions: of his presence, of his eventual return, of her own identity as his beloved, of their mutual passion. Yet her strategy is simultaneously subversive, for she contends the fate to which her lover has abandoned her. Her epistle is simultaneously a love letter and a legal challenge, a revolt staged in writing. (*Discourses* 17-18)

conflict; Mariane writes just to write. M.J. Muratore notes: "...for Mariane, writing is not a means to an end, but an end in and of itself" (299)⁵. While she seems to want to reconnect with her lover, she does not write her letters for this purpose as she says; she writes her letters for herself more so than for him. Through her letter writing, Mariane perpetuates a crippling obsession that causes her to engage in thoughts of self-injury. For the Portuguese nun, the compulsion to write does not represent an effort at self-affirmation. Rather, it represents the obsessive reliving of her loss of her lover. This repetitive rendering of lost love echoes throughout many epistolary texts, and this early portrayal of loss provides a model through which to view similar works from later periods. To come to a clearer understanding about the nature of loss and obsession in epistolary fiction, I will base my argument on Freud's theories of melancholia and will examine compulsive letter writing as a manifestation of these theories⁶.

When Guilleragues created the character of Mariane, he also created a text that took absence and loss as focal points of emotional action; this absence becomes a launching point for later one-sided letter novels in which the absence of a lover or a friend becomes an opportunity for the protagonist's self-reflective development. These novels, mostly written by women, explored female experience by disclosing the private troubles of the woman letter writer in a limiting, patriarchal society. In contrast with *Lettres portugaises*, narratives like Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* (1784) and Marie de Riccoboni's *Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby* (1759) did not focus on the lover's abandonment; rather, each of texts focuses on the development of the heroine through the writing to a close female friend. Despite the

⁵ Also commenting on the self-sustaining nature of the nun's letters, Janet Gurkin Altman asserts: "In the *Portugaises* type the 'event' is the writing" (128). In stating this, she is exploring the lack of plot in the novel outside of the nun's rhetorical questions and accusations.

⁶ Some critics may find it questionable to apply modern psychological theories to a seventeenth century text, but the concept of melancholia has existed in human understanding since a much earlier period. While these early theories of melancholia do not include the same details as Freud's concept, it is possible to say that the author would have been familiar with his contemporary understanding of this affliction. For more information, consult: Francis Zimmerman, "The History of Melancholia." *Journal of the International Institute*. 2:2 (1995). Web. May 19 2013.

development inherent to writing to a friend, both Charrière and Riccoboni's female protagonists struggle within the confines of their relationships with men and seem to abandon the self that they cultivated in their correspondence.

However, these texts do not contain the same masochistic self-annihilation because of the choice of correspondent: an understanding friend rather than a lost lover. Janet Gurkin Altman emphasizes the importance of the addressee: "In order to make a *confidence*, as epistolary characters so often, one must have *confiance* in the *confident*. If *confidences* constitute part of the epistolary medium (letters written to confidants being one of the fundamental vehicles of epistolary narrative), the loss and winning of *confiance* are part of the epistolary subject" (48). In the case of these two novels, the choice of the friend as addressee emphasizes a need for *confiance* and for affirmation in self-development. While the novel's reader does not see the responses from the confidant, the letter writer implies that she has received some form of response. However, often times, whether or not there is a response remains a moot point. Because the young women are writing to reaffirm their selfhood, there is no need for the letters to create a dialogue; no outside opinions are necessary. In fact, these female protagonists write to their friends because their friends share their opinions and will reflect them back in a way that affirms the self. In the dissertation *Unsent/Unanswered Letter in Epistolary Fiction by Modern Women Writers of Color*, Kai-Ling Liu discusses the implications of the one-sided exchange in a contemporary context:

The mode is monologic in the sense that these women write for themselves. At the same time, the mode is also dialogic, in the sense that these women think they are writing to someone else. For different reasons, all these epistolary works bear the characteristics of a diary, chronologically recording the innermost side of the female letter writers. Although there are addressees, these addressees function as personae of the letter-writers' split self. (Liu 16)

By addressing this split self, the letter writer cultivates self-understanding in these two earlier narratives and in the narratives that Liu discusses. However, as we will see later in this introduction, the letter writer's split self in these one-sided exchanges does not always promote self-understanding. In fact, it can be detrimental. For the marginalized women that I examine in this dissertation, exile and cultural confusion contribute to the split in the self that the letter writer is exploring through the epistolary act. For Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb, the epistolary novel simultaneously represents a letter to a trusted confidant and to the lost home that they have never experienced. *L'Exil selon Julia*, *Lettre morte*, and *Une forme de vie* all explore some form of traumatic loss, and in each case, it is sometimes difficult to determine what has been lost to provoke their intense, melancholic responses.

II. Freud's Concept of Melancholia

In his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud addresses the difference between these two similarly constructed concepts. He asserts that mourning represents the normal process of coming to terms with the loss of a loved one; he extends this definition of a lost loved one to include abstract notions such as one's nation or a philosophical ideal. However, he establishes melancholia as a separate condition based on its pathological nature. He explains that a psychoanalyst can characterize both mourning and melancholia with very similar symptoms: deep depression, loss of interest in the surrounding world, inability to love, and cessation of normal activities. However, there is one symptom of melancholia that is *not* a symptom of mourning: a devaluation of the self that begins with incessant self-reproach and guilt and ultimately results in the belief that one will be horribly punished (243-244).

Freud argues further that the self-reproaches of the melancholic are actually reproaches of the lost love object. He explains that, for the melancholic, a libidinal attachment to the love

object existed at one point, but that something caused the relationship to be irreparably damaged. However, for the melancholic, the libido does not withdraw from this love object and move to a new one like it would in a person without the pathology. In this situation, the libido withdraws entirely from the ego and through this withdrawal works to engender a connection or ego identification with the lost love object (“Mourning” 249).

He contends that the loss of the love-object often serves to bring to light any troubles that the relationship may have had. If ambivalence caused by simultaneously loving and reviling the love-object exists in a person with obsessional neurosis, mourning becomes stalemated, turning into the pathological state of melancholia in which the mourner is responsible for the loss of the love-object. For melancholics, the loss of the object through death is therefore not the direct cause of the condition; in these situations, it is often death in addition to ambivalence that provokes the illness and depression. Thus, through narcissistic identification with the love-object, the melancholic self-punishes for the perceived grievances against the lost object and also simultaneously punishes the loved person by making him or her witness the illness in the melancholic’s imagination. This punishment of the love-object through the processes of self-tormenting is often a response to the need to display hostility towards the love-object while being unable to do so.

Freud asserts that the collapse of the love object into the ego stems from the damaged relationship between the object and the melancholic, but he is quick to point out that the nature and causes of such hostility is rarely apparent to the melancholic. He states: “Constitutional ambivalence belongs by its nature to the repressed; traumatic experiences in connection with the object may have activated other repressed material. Thus everything to do with these struggles due to ambivalence remains withdrawn from consciousness, until the outcome characteristic of

melancholia has set in.” (“Mourning” 257). In other words, the ambivalent emotional relationship between the melancholic and the lost love-object in some circumstances could stem from a traumatic experience involving the love-object that the melancholia sufferer has repressed. Freud argues that the distaste for the love object asserts itself in the form of self-loathing and anguish that the melancholic redirects from the object to the self. This negative identification of the lost love object with the self provokes the shift in self-concept that turns towards self-hatred.

This essay does not represent Freud’s final opinions about melancholia. In fact, as his theories on the ego expanded, so did his examination of melancholia. In “On Narcissism,” Freud explains the relationship between the narcissistic personality and melancholia⁷. Freud’s next significant work to examine melancholia is 1922’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In this essay, Freud expands upon the pivotal concept of identification to include his discussion of objects. He differentiates between an object/person with whom one identifies and an object/person to whom one feels a libidinal attraction. Freud defines identification as: “...the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. It plays a part in the early history of the Oedipus complex. A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may simply say that he takes his father as his ideal” (*Group Psychology* 105). Although the father is the young boy’s ideal, his relationship with the father is ambivalent; he simultaneously idealizes the man and wishes to replace him. Freud asserts that this wish for replacement is part of the oral phase of libidinal development. In this phase, the infant wants to ingest objects that he/she desires or loves. In the process of ingesting the object, the object is annihilated. The desire to consume the object applies equally to the object of identification as to the sexually cathected object. As an extension of

⁷ For more on “On Narcissism,” please consult chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation.

identification and the father-ideal, Freud expands upon the idea of the ego-ideal and its association with melancholia:

...these melancholias...show us the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which has been altered by introjections and which contains the lost object. But the piece which behaves so cruelly is not unknown to us either. It comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego, though never so relentlessly and so unjustifiably. On previous occasions we have been driven to the hypothesis that some such agency develops in our ego which may cut itself off from the rest of the ego and come into conflict with it. We have called it the 'ego ideal', and by way of functions we have ascribed to it self-observation, the moral conscience, the censorship of dreams, and the chief influence in repression (*Group Psychology* 110).

In this split of the ego, the loss of the object becomes difficult to bear, and the melancholic turns to the ego ideal to find solace from the split (*Group Psychology* 110). However, the melancholic is constantly subjected to the ego ideal's criticism because it represents societal influences of morality. Freud continues: "...the ego ideal comprises the sum of all the limitations to which the ego has to acquiesce, and for the reason the abrogation of the ideal would necessarily be a magnificent festival for the ego, which might then once again feel satisfied with itself" (*Group Psychology* 131). However, for the melancholic, the return to the ego is not possible because the ego has become so compromised by the introjections of the lost love object; in other words, the ambivalence for the love object manifests as ambivalence for the ego/self. Freud thus asserts that the feelings of guilt and inferiority that a melancholic suffers are the result of tension between the ego and the ego ideal. Freud concludes that melancholia results from this tension and the ego ideal's exacting standards.

Freud continues to develop his theories about melancholia in his 1923 essay, *The Ego and the Id*. This work is most famous for Freud's establishment of three distinct parts of the individual psychological make-up: the ego, the id, and the super-ego. Freud defines the ego:

We have formed the idea that in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his *ego*. It is to this ego that consciousness is attached; the ego controls the approaches to motility – that is, to the discharge of excitations into the external world; it is the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes...From this ego proceed repressions, too... (*The Ego* 630)

By contrast, the id comprises the instinctual drives and is primarily unconscious. The super-ego is a re-evaluation of the ego ideal; the super-ego serves as the conscience and the moral compass. Because of this, it is often in conflict with the id's instincts. The ego functions as the middleman that negotiates between these two competing psychological forces. The introduction of the id as a concept causes certain shifts in Freud's understanding of love objects. He argues that there is initially little difference between identification and object cathexis, and that the id is the area of the psyche in which these object cathexes originate. In contrast with the ego and the super-ego that have to develop, the id is present from birth. Because the id does not need to develop, it takes advantage of the feeble, developing ego by asserting its erotic needs as object cathexis. The ego can either give in to these desires or can repress them through the help of the super-ego. However, the intervention of the super-ego often provokes further difficulties and engenders melancholia: "In melancholia the impression that the super-ego has obtained a hold upon consciousness is even stronger. But here the ego ventures no objection; it admits its guilt and submits to the punishment..." (*The Ego* 653). The super-ego's sadistic need to punish the ego eventually triggers the death instinct⁸, and often the super-ego's punishment of the inferior ego drives the ego into death. In turn, Freud believes that the fear of death in melancholia results from the ego's persecution by the super-ego when the ego wants to be loved by the super-ego. In this final formulation of melancholia, Freud puts significantly less emphasis on the role of the

⁸ Freud first introduced the concept of the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It essentially means that an organism desires to return to an earlier state, i.e., a state of inexistence. For more on the death instinct, consult Chapter Three of this dissertation.

lost love object in its development. In his incisive work on racial melancholia, David L. Eng notes this shift and its implications on Freud's theories:

While Freud attempts to characterize melancholia as a mode of pathological mourning, he does not sustain this distinction. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud later observes that the ego itself is composed of abandoned object cathexes. As such, there can be no ego without – or prior to – melancholia. Melancholia is the privileged psychic mechanism by which “forsaken” objects are simultaneously preserved in and as the ego. (Eng 140)

Thus, in Freud's later constructions of melancholia, it is a much more normative process. Eng notes: “In the later version, melancholia is neither pathological nor counterproductive” (Eng 143). We must take this into consideration as we begin to explore the various epistolary manifestations of melancholia. Is the melancholia that the protagonists and authors suffer crippling or “counterproductive”? Or, rather, does the melancholia increase the author's abilities of artistic production and meaning – or both?

III. The Letter as Melancholic Space

With this overview of the Freudian concept of melancholia in mind, I will briefly examine Guilleragues's *Lettres Portugaises* as a template for the melancholic letter texts that Pineau, L  , and Nothomb have created. Katharine Ann Jensen refers to the trope that Mariane represents as “Epistolary Woman”: “Seduced, betrayed, and suffering, this woman writes letter after letter of anguished and masochistic lament to the man who has left her behind” (*Writing* 1). Unfulfilled desire is at the center of these letters of suffering. This unfulfilled desire finds no resolution in Mariane's letters; by contrast, the letters perpetuate the feelings of abandonment that plague the nun. Mariane does not resolve the anguish that the *chevalier*'s absence causes because she has not released him from his role as a libidinal object. Mariane alternates between self-reproach and accusations of her former lover. The novel's first lines reveal her severe response to her abandonment:

Considère, mon amour, jusqu'à quel excès tu as manqué de prévoyance. Ah! malheureux! Tu as été trahi, tu m'as trahi par des espérances trompeuses. Une passion sur laquelle tu avais fait tant de projets de plaisirs, ne te cause présentement qu'un mortel désespoir, qui ne peut être comparé qu'à la cruauté de l'absence qui le cause. Quoi? cette absence à laquelle ma douleur, tout ingénieuse qu'elle est, ne peut donner un nom assez funeste me privera donc pour toujours de regarder ces yeux dans lesquels je voyais tant d'amour, et qui me faisaient connaître des mouvements de joie, qui me tenaient lieu de toutes choses, qui enfin me suffisaient? (Guilleragues 71)

In this passage, Mariane immediately addresses the pain that her lover's absence has caused; as she discusses the ways in which she misses him, she focuses on his eyes and the role of his gaze in confirming her self and her worth. Because she narcissistically identifies with him, the *chevalier* represents half of her ego. In writing these letters to him, she seeks to reconnect the two sides of her ego. However, this is not possible.

She has internalized him as a lost love object after his departure, and any criticism that she levies against him is equally applicable to her. Instead of finding another libidinal attachment after losing him, she maintains her connection to him. Having introjected the former lover, the anger that Mariane feels towards him turns inward and attacks her own ego. Because she both loves and hates the *chevalier*, she also loves and hates herself. As she cycles through her accusations, Mariane frequently talks about love and represses her feelings of betrayal in favor of passion. Two pages into her first letter, she writes:

Je vous conjure de me dire pourquoi vous vous êtes attaché à m'enchanter comme vous avez fait, puisque vous saviez bien que vous deviez m'abandonner? Et pourquoi avez-vous été si acharné à me rendre malheureuse? Que ne me laissez-vous en repos dans mon cloître? Vous avais-je fait quelque injure? Mais je vous demande pardon: je ne vous impute rien; je ne suis pas en état de penser à ma vengeance, et j'accuse seulement la rigueur de mon destin. (Guilleragues 73)

She begins by condemning the officer and concludes not so much as forgiving him as asking for his forgiveness. Accusing him, she shifts to accusing herself. Unable to resolve this cycle, Mariane perpetuates her melancholia by writing.

The nun repeatedly states that she will continue to write to her former lover despite the suffering that it causes: ...j'aime mieux souffrir encore davantage que vous oublier (Guilleragues 75). In fact, she masochistically wants the pain, otherwise she would not continue to write when she receives no response. Linda S. Kauffman notes: "Her ritual reenactment whenever he appeared establishes a link between repetitive event and narrative inspiration that, significantly, depends on an absence. They did not yet know one another, but the nun fills in the gaps by narrating what she felt, imagined, persuaded herself to believe" (Kauffman, *Discourses* 103). Nancy K. Miller refers to Mariane as representative of "the trope of *penultimate* masochism, the always renewable figure of feminine suffering" in the article "'I's' in Drag: The Sex of Recollection" (56). In the contrasting opinions of the critics who have written about *Lettres portugaises*, Peggy Kamuf views Mariane's writing gesture in a more positive light that puts less emphasis on the nun's suffering: "From this point on, the project of the cure is taken over by the process of losing her ignorance about why she writes. Beginning with the third letter, then, it is the relationship to her own discourse about her desire which counteracts and displaces the suffering in her relationship to her lover" (60). David Highnam believes that Mariane finds resolution through her letters: "Letter 4 thus shows clear signs that Mariane is curbing her object-oriented passion, interiorizing it, and establishing a justification for its existence *regardless* of the nature of the object which brought it into being" (375). However, I see little resolution in the progression of the letters; even as Mariane claims to be moving on after repeatedly discussing her love, she still turns to the *chevalier* for approval: "Que ma modération vous plaira, que vous serez content de moi! Je ne veux point le savoir je vous ai déjà prié de ne m'écrire plus, et je vous en conjure encore" (Guilleragues 93). If she has recovered from their romance, why would

it matter if he would be pleased? While her letters do stop shortly after this statement, there is no resolution; Mariane remains in a melancholic cycle.

Taking Mariane as an example for letter writers suffering from melancholia, we can establish a pattern of epistolary melancholia that persists in texts written four hundred years later. In a more modern interpretation on the one-sided letter exchange that discusses a loss, Senegalese author Mariama Bâ's 1981 novel, *Une si longue lettre*, revitalized the epistolary novel in a Francophone context. A substantially more feminist text than *Lettres portugaises*, Bâ's protagonist Ramatoulaye nonetheless begins writing after the death of her estranged husband, Modou. As he had taken a younger woman as a second wife, she experienced losing him significantly before his actual death. However, because she was still married to Modou when he died, she must observe the *Mirasse*, or the Muslim mourning customs that require the widow to live in isolation for forty days. From this isolation, Ramatoulaye begins writing a long, diary-like letter to her best friend Aïssatou. Unlike Mariane's *chevalier*, Ramatoulaye's choice of Aïssatou as correspondent indicates a desire to write to a trusted friend. In the novel's second paragraph, Ramatoulaye confirms her friend's function: "J'ai reçu ton mot. En guise de réponse, j'ouvre ce cahier, point d'appui dans mon désarroi: notre longue pratique m'a enseigné que la confiance noie la douleur" (Bâ 11). For Ramatoulaye, the letter becomes a space in which to explore her traumatic abandonment with a friend that represents an extension of herself. Detailing the close relationships that their grandmothers and mothers enjoyed before their births, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou have been inseparable since childhood; because of their profound intimacy, Ramatoulaye can speak to her friend as she would to her own reflection.

While the nature of the correspondent changes, the need to discuss the lost love object does not; Ramatoulaye spends a good deal of time in the novel reliving Modou's abandonment

of her: “Et dire que j’ai aimé passionnément cet homme, dire que je lui ai consacré trente ans de ma vie, dire que j’ai porté douze fois son enfant. L’adjonction d’une rivale à ma vie ne lui a pas suffi. En aimant une autre, il a brûlé son passé moralement et matériellement...” (Bâ 32). Stuck in her nostalgic attachment to a time long since past, Ramatoulaye does not initially relinquish Modou and the suffering that her relationship with him caused. In the article “Lettre sénégalaise de Ramatoulaye: Writing as Action in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*,” Ada Uzomaka Azodo explores the commonalities between *Lettres portugaises* and *Une si longue lettre* and discovers similar isolation, obsession with the past, and feelings of loss. Azodo notes that Ramatoulaye struggles with memories of Modou, her lost love object: “For this troubled widow, the past is not yet past as she speaks to the dead, spelling out his name in full, as if to recall that it was the same man who yesterday courted her who has today abandoned her morally and materially” (Azodo 10). Like Mariane, Ramatoulaye alternates between criticizing her husband and feeling self-pity for his departure. However, she does not engage in the sort of self-reproach that Mariane does for the *chevalier*’s faithlessness.

In the novel’s initial chapters, Ramatoulaye consistently returns to the past in her writing and appears to detail a melancholic response to her original loss of Modou: “Modou Fall, à l’instant où tu t’inclinais devant moi pour m’inviter danser, je sus que tu étais celui que j’attendais. Grand et athlétiquement bâti. Teint ambré dû à ta lointaine appurtenance mauresque, certes aussi. Virilité et finesse des traits harmonieusement conjuguées, certes encore. Mais surtout, tu savais être tendre” (Bâ 33). Ramatoulaye nostalgically repeats images of her lost love; rather than remembering him as he was when he left her, she initially retreats into better memories. However, as the novel progresses, she begins integrating less pleasant memories and comes to terms with his betrayal. Kathryn R. Fleming discusses Ramatoulaye’s difficulties in recovering

from the trauma: “Despite all her best efforts to avoid a breakdown, to redirect her energies, to distract herself with the day-to-day business of life, Ramatoulaye is haunted by a past she has lost and by the constant reminders of Modou’s polygamous betrayal, and it is not until Modou’s death that she will find the space to confront the demons of the past which she feels compelled to deny” (216). Eventually, unlike Mariane, Ramatoulaye progresses beyond her melancholic response and begins to mend her damaged ego, proclaiming to Aïssatou: “Je survivais” (Bâ 98). Ramatoulaye attributes her survival after heartbreak to motherhood. Because of her importance in her children’s lives, she is able to find narcissistic gratification through their need for her. Acting as their support system, however, she begins dealing with situations that trouble her more traditional views: one of her daughters becomes pregnant out of wedlock and three other daughters smoke and want to wear pants. Engrossed in the difficulties of trying to raise young women who are not too Westernized, she is able to distract herself from the pain that Modou’s abandonment caused. However, this pain periodically creeps back into her letter. Because the letter contains significant reflection on past events, Ramatoulaye has difficulty telling her stories without reverting to the struggles that she was experiencing at the time. In some sense, this inability to entirely leave the past behind mimics Mariane’s repetition of stories from her past with the officer. In this repetitive cycle, Ramatoulaye questions: “Et je m’interroge. Et je m’interroge. Pourquoi? Pourquoi Modou s’est-il détaché? Pourquoi a-t-il introduit Binetou entre nous?” (Bâ 107). Amidst her proclamations of survival and independence, she inevitably returns to questions that she asked in the beginning of her narrative. Less repetitive than Mariane and the other melancholic protagonists that this project examines, Ramatoulaye nevertheless mentally returns to an ideal past and has trouble working through it.

While the first two critics that I have cited in this brief discussion have tended to focus on Ramatoulaye's examination of loss and its trauma, Keith L. Walker interprets her character differently as he emphasizes her use of the letter in her self-discovery:

Ramatoulaye, the correspondent, is not a passionate woman in love, alone and tormented, who through the projective epistolary gesture seeks to turn her lover's absence into an imagined presence and her soliloquy into an imagined, fulfilling dialogue. Ramatoulaye's letter is a retrospective, written, indeed, under the traditional epistolary sign of absence, but with distinction that she has been abandoned utterly – through infidelity, remarriage, and her lover-husband's death. There is no hope or possibility ever again of dialogue and presence. Ramatoulaye's letter writing as therapy and retrospective seeks "to penetrate the deepest abysses of being." (Walker 257)

According to this interpretation of *Une si longue lettre*, the letter-writing act becomes one of self-development rather than one that perpetuates obsession and melancholia⁹. The novels in this project stem from a convergence of these two types of narratives: the "Portuguese" and "Senegalese" letter events. From the Portuguese style, Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb take the obsessive thinking and self-devaluation of the melancholic letter; from the Senegalese style, the authors take a trusted confidant as addressee and the notion of the letter as self-reflective. In each case the protagonist appears to come to the letter to seek solace and find a resolution to the profound psychological wounds that she has experienced. While Ramatoulaye revolts against societal constraints in traditional Senegalese society, she remains grounded in her native culture; for the epistolary narrators that I highlight in this project, exile is to blame for many of the difficulties they endure. It is the feeling of exile and border-negotiation that Keith L. Walker

⁹ Elizabeth Campbell examines Anglophone epistolary narratives that function in a similar manner. She argues that the authors that she works with engage with the tradition as a way of developing a voice in a society where they are marginalized: "It is not coincidental that these books appear at a time when women are both conscious of new freedoms available to them and angry about past and present repression. Previous flowerings of epistolary literature – in first century B.C. Rome and in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France – are also connected with a positive change in the status of women, and with a sense of the validity of the writer's own culture in relation to the rest of the world. Since World War II in post-colonial countries, the colonized society, or under-culture, has begun to see itself not as lesser but as other, and has begun to take pride in its roots and culture. Post-colonial cultures can be psychological as well as political and geographical. As women and 'others' gained more freedom and status, they were allowed to use their own voices..." (Campbell 334-335)

believes makes the epistolary novel a compelling choice for the Francophone and other marginalized women that have revived it in the last thirty years:

In broad terms, francophone literary culture is concerned with transitional social realities and the ever-shifting construction of the francophone identity as it responds to the pressures of the political, the social, and the legal. In this sense the letter should not be a surprising form of literary expression for a francophone woman writer. As an artifact the letter is in *transit*, crisscrossing borders and barriers, negotiating the national and international *in-between* places, where, in francophone literature, difference, displacement...change, and conflict are signified. (Walker 249)

However, Walker views the transitional nature of Ramatoulaye's letter as indicative of personal growth. By contrast, Pineau fully embraces the letter as a space in which her characters attempt to assuage their melancholia, they are not entirely successful doing so and instead are often blocked by repression. Similarly, Lê and Nothomb seem to embrace the positive aspects of the epistolary narrative, but actually dismantle the association between self-development and epistolarity. For them, the letter form represents an opportunity for obsessive thinking and ultimately self-destruction. Pineau's letter writers, while melancholic for most of the novel, appear to recover from their struggles by the novel's end because both are no longer forced to live in exile. By contrast, Lê and Nothomb's narrators continue their melancholic response as they live through the impossibility of returning "home." In an article by Kate Averis discussing Lê's particular difficulties, the critic makes a series of statements that are equally applicable to Pineau and Nothomb's quest for a "home": "If homecoming refers to the actual journey of return to the country of birth, the family and the native culture, it can also be considered a literary project whereby the author attempts to come to terms with his/her displacement, and address the anguish that typifies the experience of exile" (Averis 75). Unfortunately for the authors and protagonists of the novels that this project discusses, this quest for home becomes impossible, and they are never able to come to terms with their exile or with their damaged egos.

In addition to the melancholic one-sided *Lettres portugaises*, the contemporary authors who are creating letter narratives are also participating in another epistolary tradition: the exchange that takes place while at least one character is exiled. The novel that is most pertinent to our ongoing discussion is Françoise de Graffigny's 1747 *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. Janie Vanpée situates Graffigny's novel in the context of epistolary and travel narratives of the period:

By the time Graffigny wrote her novel, travelers' accounts of their encounters with other cultures were a common literary topos, whether in the form of historical or proto-anthropological relations of Europeans discovering new peoples, or of fictions of foreigners observing French culture. By grafting the unhappy love story of her female narrator onto a tale of discovery of cultural difference, however, Graffigny conflated two genres and confused some of her critics. Was the novel to be read as a variation on the epistolary models provided by Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) or the sentimental *Lettres portugaises* (1669)? In either case, Graffigny's "copy" could not measure up to the "original" and the novel was dismissed as secondary literature and condemned to oblivion... (135)

Because of her masterful ability to combine various genres, Graffigny's novel is not a mere "copy", but, rather, it is a template that helps in understanding the epistolary texts that come afterwards. When she wrote *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, Graffigny created a feminist text that rejected the period's conventions of narrative style and plot.

On one level, Graffigny integrates a theatrical approach to the letter narrative that will appear again in Lê's letter/monologue in *Lettre morte*. Graffigny was a successful playwright during her lifetime, and *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* displays her talent for theatrical writing. Christine Roulston remarks on the importance of theater in Graffigny's feminist interpretation of the epistolary narrative: "The epistolary model is interpreted here as a form of feminine theatre, a public-private space where the female narrator can become visible as acting subject without becoming the object of the gaze" (Roulston 33). Graffigny's narrating protagonist, Zilia, develops emotionally and intellectually throughout the novel. Similarly to Bâ's portrayal of Ramatoulaye's personal growth, Zilia develops a coherent sense of self through her letter writing

despite being separated from her lover and in exile from her native country. While her narrative is not melancholic like the others that I have examined and will examine, the authors in this project owe a great debt of gratitude to Graffigny's innovations.

Lettres d'une Péruvienne consists of a one-sided group of letters that the narrator, Zilia, writes to her fiancé, Aza. Zilia is a princess who is kidnapped from a temple in Peru on her wedding day by Spanish invaders. They take her on a boat to Europe, and during the beginning of her separation from Aza, she composes her letters to him using *quipos* (tied knots on a rope that a person uses to communicate like written language). Eventually, she becomes a captive of the French and meets Captain Déterville, the man who helps to teach her the French language and culture. Throughout her letters to him, Zilia describes her new experiences on a boat and in European society. After months away, she runs out of thread to tie her *quipos* and begins writing to Aza in French despite the fact that he cannot read the language. Graffigny uses Zilia's foreignness to examine French society from the position of an outsider and to criticize its excesses and superficiality. Zilia is particularly eloquent in describing the plight of women: "Mais je sais que, du moment que les filles commencent à être capable de recevoir des instructions, on les enferme dans une maison religieuse, pour leur apprendre à vivre dans le monde. Que l'on confie le soin d'éclairer leur esprit à des personnes auxquelles on ferait peut-être un crime d'en avoir, et qui sont incapables de leur former le cœur, qu'elles ne connaissent" (Graffigny 138). Zilia's text mimics Mariane's in that Zilia addresses her lost lover, but until the novel's last third, Zilia continues to love Aza and believes that he loves her. She also writes to Déterville towards the end of the novel rather than just writing to Aza. As her friendship develops with Déterville, he professes his love for her, but she does not return the sentiment.

However, she eventually learns that Aza has been unfaithful and is heartbroken. The letter where she learns this truly mimics Mariane's letters to the *chevalier* in that it is filled with reproach to the lover to Aza, she discusses him in the third person in a letter to her new confidant, Déterville: "Il est parti! je ne le verrai plus! il me fuit, il ne m'aime plus, il me l'a dit: tout est fini pour moi. Il prend une autre épouse, il m'abandonne, l'honneur l'y condamne; eh bien, cruel Aza, puisque le fantastique honneur de l'Europe a des charmes pour toi, que n'imitais-tu aussi l'art qui l'accompagne!" (Graffigny 161-162). However, unlike Mariane, Zilia appears to make some sort of recovery in her later letters to Déterville and appears to thrive in France. Déterville and his sister help Zilia by finding a house for her to live in, and Zilia transforms the space into a room of her own and spends her days writing and reading. The authors of the epistolary novels of this project mirror Graffigny's portrayal of exile; Zilia reacts to her exile in a significantly different way than Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb's narrators. Zilia is able to discover more of herself (she literally "discovers" her own appearance in a mirror for the first time¹⁰) and of her abilities. Thus, her exile is a positive experience to some extent. Factoring in more recent colonial history and identity politics, the three contemporary authors have a much more conflicted experience. Exile remains at the center of their novels, but it does not allow for self-affirmation; rather, it is destructive.

IV. Other Contemporary Epistolary Novels by Francophone Women

Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb are not the only Francophone authors who have recently worked in the epistolary form due to the pressures of exile and marginalization. Certain contemporary epistolary novels and texts outside of the scope of this project still have vital connections to issues of exile, marginalization, and melancholia. Ying Chen's 1993 novel *Les*

¹⁰ For an enlightening discussion of this mirror scene, consult: Janet Gurkin Altman, "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third World Ideology." *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Fiction*. Ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989. 172-202

lettres chinoises includes letters from three Chinese characters (Yuan, Sassa, and Da Li) that reflect the difficulties of immigrant life and assimilation in Quebec. Like Pineau, L  , and Nothomb, Chen’s characters (most specifically Sassa) experience melancholic responses to the loss of a love object/country, but the novel portrays an actual exchange rather than the pretense of it as do Pineau, L   and Nothomb’s letters to the self. In the novel, Yuan immigrates to Canada and leaves his fianc  e Sassa behind to get her passport before she will join him. Yuan’s initial letters to Sassa are full of pain and frustration at their separation, and they also criticize Canadian culture and demonstrate his homesickness. Sassa promises in her letters to Yuan that she is working on the paperwork that would enable her to join him, but in another set of letters that Sassa writes to her friend Da Li (who has also immigrated to Canada), Sassa expresses trepidation at the thought of exile despite equal feelings of unease about her own country. She also has trouble adapting to life without Yuan and feels adrift without his presence. She struggles because she feels that she has little in common with her sister and other young people because Sassa is very traditional while the girls around her have adopted more Westernized behaviors. She battles marginalization and exile in her home country: “On n’a pas besoin d’aller    l’  tranger pour devenir   tranger. On peut tr  s bien l’  tre chez soi. Quand on ne se sent pas bien ailleurs, on bl  me son exil et on se console avec les souvenirs de sa m  re patrie, purifi  s...par l’imagination gr  ce    la distance et au temps   coul  . Mais quand on est   tranger chez soi, on n’a aucun espace de retraite” (Chen 27). While Sassa battles these demons, Yuan becomes increasingly acclimated to his new Canadian home. Sassa continues to write to him and her friend Da Li, but as she begins to have health problems, she tells Da Li but remains conspicuously silent about them to Yuan. Sassa describes a visit to the doctor:

Quand on est jeune, qu'on a le cœur léger et les reins solides, on ne craint rien. Mais moi j'ai peur. Mon corps s'affaiblit depuis un certain temps et, avec lui, mon esprit, ma volonté. Oui, oui, crois-moi. Tu sais très bien que j'ai toujours eu une santé fragile.

Hier encore, j'avais de la fièvre. Je suis allée voir un médecin traditionnel. Il a mis ses doigts sur mon poignet pendant quelques minutes. Puis il m'a demandé ce qui était arrivé dans ma vie. Je lui ai dit:

-Mon fiancé est parti.

D'un air soulagé, il a conclu tout de suite:

-Ah, ce n'est donc pas grave, ma petite fille. Ce n'est que la tristesse. La tristesse, ce n'est pas grave. (Chen 29)

Between Yuan's departure and her isolation, Sassa experiences physical symptoms of her depression. Having lost Yuan to Canada, she cannot continue with her life the way that it was before, but she also experiences crippling fear at the possibility of change. Meanwhile, Da Li begins writing about a young Chinese man with whom she is having an affair. As she slowly reveals details, the reader is struck by the similarities between the young man and Yuan; Da Li's lover is a student who has recently immigrated to Canada and who left a fiancée behind in China. While Sassa never directly accuses Yuan of being unfaithful, she is increasingly ill. Feeling as if she has lost Yuan forever, Sassa attempts to distance herself from him and tells him that he should forget about her. At the same time, Da Li experiences dissatisfaction in Quebec and decides to try moving to France to make a life for herself there. Yuan is distressed by Sassa's behavior and offers to return to China. She refuses his offer and goes into the hospital, appearing to have given up on living entirely. In *Lettres chinoises*, Chen engages with questions of exile and assimilation, but it is striking that in her epistolary narrative that the character who suffers the most psychologically is the one who never leaves her homeland. Like the three novels in the body of this project, Chen's novel portrays the difficulties of modern life, but unlike the others, Chen does not depict melancholia as resulting from an actual exile like Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb. While her Sassa seems to suffer from melancholia that results in her failing health, Da Li struggles somewhat in Quebec, but she does not make statements that imply psychological

difficulties like those of Pineau, Lê, or Nothomb's protagonists. I chose to exclude this novel from this project because Sassa's melancholia does not stem from the loss of the homeland in exile and the exiled Da Li does not seem to suffer from melancholia despite her continued need to displace herself. However, in future projects, Chen's text would provide an interesting counterpoint to my discussion of traumatic exile; I would specifically like to engage with the text using the theories of racial melancholia that I briefly set forth in the Pineau chapter in an effort to better understand Sassa's feelings of exile in her "home" and her fascination with the French language.

Another recent epistolary text that has received significant attention among critics of Francophone literature is Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar's 1999 book *Lettres parisiennes*. This text consists of a real-life exchange between the two authors that discusses the politics of exile and the French language; because of the non-fictional nature of the text, it resembles a collection of essays more so than a letter text at times. However, again, Huston and Sebbar's feelings of loss are pervasive in the text as they struggle to assimilate into French society. Like Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb, Huston and Sebbar engage with their exile through letters, a document that requires movement to fulfill its purpose of communication. In fact, the choice that the two authors make is a deliberate one; they both live in Paris and have met in person before. They decide to continue a conversation they had through letters and thus symbolically recreate their own trajectories in exile by writing to each other. Nancy Huston is an Anglophone Canadian author who lives in France and who has adopted French as her language of expression. Her letters portray her contentious relationship with her home country; in one letter, Huston describes a trip to Alberta (her home province) and levies some very pointed criticism at American and Canadian society. Despite these criticisms, she writes that she struggles to make the transition

between Canada and France when she makes trips between the two: “Bref, ce n’est pas pour moi une chose joyeuse que l’aller-retour d’un pays à l’autre” (Huston and Sebbar 25). Having been critical of Canada immediately after her arrival, Huston adjusts back to the country only to find herself having to adjust back to life in Paris after her return. She describes her difficulties more thoroughly:

Et dans l’avion...je pleure. Je pleure d’avoir à quitter ces êtres qui me connaissent et me comprennent, au fond, mieux que les Français ne le feront jamais; je pleure l’immense, l’incomparable ciel canadien; je pleure la langue anglaise qui m’a accueillie avec tant de naturel...je pleure d’être la femme têtue et prétentieuse que je me semble alors, la femme sans cœur qui a tout balancé pour aller s’éclater à Paris. (Huston and Sebbar 24-25)

In this passage, she lists the many things that she mourns as she makes the transatlantic flight. Huston’s use of the word “mourn” is particularly striking; as she leaves Canada behind, she repeats the process of object loss with each voyage. However, Canada is no longer her home, and she has no desire to return there permanently. As Huston straddles two identities, she raises her daughter speaking French rather than English and establishes her new family roots in her adopted country.

Leïla Sebbar is Huston’s correspondent, and she is the daughter of a French mother and an Algerian father. Sebbar grew up in French colonial Algeria and moved to Paris later in life. While Huston is linguistically but not racially Other, Sebbar is a native French speaker, but she is the racial Other, and thus, her experience is significantly different from that of Huston. However, the two are connected by their melancholic responses to the loss of the “home.” Substantially into their exchange, Sebbar becomes unsettled by the ideas in their letters. She states:

J’ai beaucoup parlé de l’exil, j’ai bavardé, fouillé ma mémoire, perdu et retrouvé des signes...de lettre en lettre je me sens saisie par l’exil, je le vois partout, il me devient insupportable. J’ai l’impression que lorsque je ne me pensais pas dans l’exil, j’étais protégée. M’exposer à moi-même dans cette perte, ce deuil du pays natal...c’est m’exposer du même coup sans défense à toute malveillance. (Huston and Sebbar 129)

Like Huston who mourns many things as she leaves from her trips to Canada, Sebbar feels a divide between the two sides of herself that are represented through her lineage; in this passage, she highlights two words that have appeared throughout the melancholic epistolary texts that I have examined: “perte” and “deuil.” Through the letters, Sebbar dredges up repressed feelings about her exile that she has long denied. As for Man Ya and Pineau’s narrator, Huston and Sebbar’s letters allow for self-expression and self-comprehension with an understanding correspondent who has similar experiences. On the other hand, the letters also have negative effects, as noted by Sebbar’s struggles with exile that she associates with the exchange. While Huston and Sebbar’s melancholic difficulties mirror those of the other authors, I have excluded *Lettres parisiennes* from this dissertation because it does not match the genre of the other texts. While *L’Exil selon Julia*, *Lettre morte*, and *Une forme de vie* all have a certain basis in their authors’ actual personal history, the novels are still works of fictional autobiography; the authors present the works as novels rather than as non-fiction. By contrast, Huston and Sebbar present their text as non-fiction. Because of the common thematic aspects, Huston and Sebbar’s correspondence would provide a striking point of comparison between fictional and non-fictional epistolarity in a contemporary context.

Expanding our discussion further, there are also novels that, despite not being marked as epistolary texts, bear clear resemblance to *Lettre morte*. Because Lê’s novel lacks epistolary markers outside of the title, it often resembles a journal or inner monologue rather than a letter. However, because of the title and the prevalence of the letter image, Lê’s intent to create an epistolary novel is clear. The question remains though: if there are no narrative markers such as a salutation, how many novels could be considered “epistolary” in another study? After all, is a journal or diary just a letter to the self like the letters to the mirrored self that this project’s three

novels present? If we expand our scope by thinking in this fashion, there are two other works that could provide interesting discussion points to the examination of racial and exilic melancholia. Miriam Warner-Vierya's *Juletane* is intimate first-person journal narrative that has several common themes with *Une si longue lettre* and *Lettre morte*. *Juletane* tells the stories of two women of color as they attempt to negotiate their French education and their Antillean backgrounds. A woman named Hélène discovers a journal written by Juletane amongst her things and begins to read Juletane's intimate history. Hélène is a forty-year-old career woman who is preparing to marry Ousmane, a submissive younger man. As she starts Juletane's journal, Hélène is experiencing significant doubts about her life's trajectory, and she interprets Juletane's story as a mirror of her own troubles. In the beginning of the journal, Juletane describes her life as an adolescent (briefly) and a young adult in Paris. She becomes an orphan at a relatively early age, and Juletane moves from the Antilles to Paris to live with her godmother. She meets a young African student named Mamadou, marries him, and moves to Senegal with him. When she arrives in the country, Juletane learns that she is not Mamadou's first wife; he has already married Awa to appease his family. This discovery deals a substantial blow to Juletane's psyche; she describes her reaction:

Cet aveu jeta un grand trouble en moi, me désespéra. J'eus l'impression que le monde n'existait plus, que toute vie s'était figée autour de moi. Je ne dis rien...Croyant trouver en Mamadou toute la famille qui me manquait, je ne l'aimais pas seulement comme un amant, un mari. C'était aussi toute cette affection filiale débordante en moi que je reportais sur lui. Une fois de plus je retrouvais mon angoisse d'orpheline. Perdue, seule au monde. Mon désarroi était immense. (Warner-Vierya 34)

Mamadou receives all of the love that Juletane has to give, so when she finds out that she is not his only love, all of the love that she has invested in him transforms into anger. Adding to the trauma of her new husband's faithlessness, Juletane finds herself in a new culture that jars her Westernized sensibilities, and she becomes even more frustrated as she sees Mamadou begin to

re-integrate into Senegalese life. After months of struggling with depression and rage, Juletane learns that she is pregnant, and she is revived. Her relationship with Mamadou recovers, and she once again feels that she has a family. However, in a tragic accident, Juletane is struck by a car and has a miscarriage. After this traumatic event, she descends into a deep melancholia and becomes isolated from the rest of the family. When she loses the baby, she loses Mamadou once again. In this series of events, Juletane loses two love objects and does not recover. Mamadou's first wife, Awa, gives birth to three children, and he also takes a cruel young woman, Ndieye, as his third wife. To establish her dominance, Ndieye physically and emotionally abuses Juletane.

With the advent of the children and the third wife, Juletane becomes melancholic. She notes that the rest of the family refers to her as a mad woman, and she shaves her head. Eventually, she loses all hope: "Pour moi, cette situation était et restait inconcevable. Il me venait à l'esprit des idées qui me faisait frémir d'horreur. Je souffrais, je pensais au suicide, je n'arrivais pas à décider. Non par la peur de la souffrance physique, mais parce que cette solution était contraire à mes principes moraux et religieux..." (Warner-Vierya 70). Because she does not kill herself, she continues her descent into apparent madness and begins having vivid, violent dreams.

Suffering in silence, Juletane finds eventual solace in the written word: "J'ai subtilisé un cahier de Diary, la fille aînée d'Awa. C'était la seule façon pour moi de disposer d'un support de réflexion. Il n'avait que deux pages utilisées. Écrire écourtera mes longues heures de découragement, me cramponnera à une activité et me procurer un ami, un confident, en tout cas je l'espère..." (Warner-Vierya 18). In this passage, the parallels between *Juletane* and *Une si longue lettre* are striking; both novels discuss the implications of polygamy for women in modern Senegal, and both novels are monologues that the character has written in isolation.

Also, the “cahier” becomes a space of self-reflection for both Ramatoulaye and Juletane. The fundamental difference between the two texts is that Ramatoulaye writes with a clear addressee in mind (Aïssatou) while Juletane writes to no one in particular. However, Warner-Vierya creates Hélène as the eventual addressee of Juletane’s journal and includes Hélène’s emotional response to what she reads. In this way, Juletane’s text and that of Hélène occur in a one-sided exchange similar to the other texts in this project. As Juletane continues her journal, she further grapples with madness and melancholia as more tragic events befall the family, and Awa’s three children are found dead. Eventually, she takes revenge on Ndieye by pouring boiling oil on the young woman’s face, and Juletane begins wondering if she killed the three children in some fit of insanity. Of the three example texts that I have briefly analyzed in this conclusion, *Juletane* is the most melancholic and violent and also the most similar to Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb’s novels, despite the fact that it is not an epistolary novel in the traditional sense. This series of texts demonstrates the myriad ways that Francophone authors are using the epistary text as a launching point for explorations of diaspora, exile, and melancholia in the modern age.

V. Diaspora, Exile, and the Epistolary Text

Because the authors that I have chosen to work on are Francophone, I must explore definitions of both diaspora and exile in order to understand the melancholic nature of their narratives; Pineau and Lê both present a diasporic perspective as people of former colonies who have moved to France, but because Nothomb, a Belgian, lived in Japan and cannot be considered part of a diaspora, she is merely an exile. By contrast, Pineau and Lê are also exiled while also part of two distinct diasporas. James Clifford states the differences between the two related concepts of exile and diaspora: diaspora indicates a series of communities from the same country of origin dispersed throughout the world, whereas exile has a “frequently individualistic focus”

(Clifford 308). We will clearly be able to differentiate between these two concepts as we explore the three novels in this project because Pineau and Lê engage with their respective diasporas while Nothomb engages with exile. In *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Robin Cohen clarifies the term diaspora and notes several key features:

When applied to humans, the ancient Greeks thought of diaspora as migration and colonization. By contrast, for Jews, Africans, Palestinians, and Armenians the expression acquired a more sinister and brutal meaning. Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile. Other peoples abroad who have also maintained strong collective identities have, in recent years, defined themselves as diasporas, though they were neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution.

The idea of diaspora thus varies greatly. However, all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that “the old country” – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. That claim may be strong or weak, or boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstance or historical period, but a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background. (Cohen ix)

In both the case of diaspora and exile, banishment and the subsequent trauma of being removed from one’s home are contingent features. However, as Cohen emphasizes, it is a community that has been removed, not merely an individual as it is in exile. Thus, while both diaspora and exile often have traumatic outcomes for those who experience them, the scale differs.¹¹ However, because many of the emotional reactions to diaspora and exile are similar, we can explore both within this space in an effort to explain the relationship between these two experiences and epistolarity.

¹¹ In “Diasporas,” James Clifford also comments on this phenomenon:

Whether the national narrative is one of common origins or of gathered populations, it cannot assimilate groups that maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere. Peoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be “cured” by merging into a new national community. This is especially true when they are the victims of ongoing, structural prejudice. Positive articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state (307).

Letters are, by definition, writing in transit. Thus, the epistolary novel is perfectly suited to representing the concerns of diaspora and exile. Feeling lost, the exiled protagonists in the novels that this project studies attempt to reconnect with the myriad things lost through the diasporic and exilic condition. Although he does not cite Freud, Edward Said examines exile from a perspective resonant with Freud's theories of melancholia. In "Reflections on Exile," Said establishes the loss of country as a loss that can often never be repaired, but he also discusses the more pathological side of exile that insists on maintaining the pain of homelessness: "No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who *feel* their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood...Clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong" (Said 363). Said alludes to a refusal to assimilate through this assertion of difference. So stricken by her loss of origins, the exiled person lives as though he or she has lost his or her parents. The constant assertion of this right to not belong can eventually become a cyclical, damaging force if left unresolved, as Said remarks: "There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments" (Said 364). Said's term "fetish of exile" captures the melancholic experience of exile characteristic of Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb's works. Through losing the loved homeland and often times also the loved ones left behind there, the exile can become fixated on her sense of difference and seek to perpetuate this feeling rather than resolve difficulties. This sense of difference provides support to the fragile self-concept; rejecting the adopted country before the adopted country can reject her, the exiled person actively defies assimilation.

The devaluation of self that occurs to those who experience the loss of the loved country in exile produces a response so strong that it rocks the ego (and in turn self-identity) to its very core, as David Eng and Shinhee Han assert:

The experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning. When one leaves one's country of origin – voluntarily or involuntarily – one must mourn a host of losses both concrete and abstract. These include homeland, family, language, identity, property, status in community – the list goes on. In Freud's theory of mourning, one works through and finds closure by investing in new objects – in the American dream, for example. (680)

However, as Eng and Han note, the exile often cannot find the closure that he or she seeks because the new country denies the exile's ability to realize these dreams and find replacement objects that could mend the troubled object relations stemming from the melancholic experience of exile. If the exiled person integrates the lost country and people into the ego, he or she can neither re-establish the fully functional self while in the new country nor establish new object attachments. Eng and Han's argument is in direct conflict with the assertions made by Said about the exile clutching his or her difference like a weapon against the wider new culture. Those suffering in exile here are suffering because they are unable to assimilate, not because they have an insistent desire to remain different. In some circumstances, this denial results in the exiled person producing an idealized vision of the home country as a defense mechanism. Still unable to assimilate, this idealized homeland becomes an emotional haven against the constant reminder of the exile's difference and rejection. In many cases, she also cannot unify the self upon return to the homeland because of changes to her identity that have inevitably also occurred since the original departure. From neither here nor there, the exiled person experiences another profound blow when she realizes that she can never return to the home.

In Pineau and Lê's cases, issues of race compound this understanding of self as different because of exile. Although Lê has publicly refused to identify herself as a Vietnamese author,

she nonetheless remains connected to her racial heritage through her melancholic repetition of images that she associates with the country. By contrast, Pineau frequently evokes her racial background in her works in an effort to explore the overt racism that she experienced as a young girl in France. Thus, both authors' melancholia extends further than mere exile to include issues of race. Unable to establish a healthy self-concept when faced with being in the racial minority in addition to being in exile, the racial Other is automatically perceived as foreign without any regard as to whether or not he or she is culturally assimilated. In her article "The Melancholy of Race," Anne Anlin Cheng investigates the particular difficulties of a racial melancholia: "Words from the invisible man remain to haunt us: 'You can carry part of your sickness with you' (575). *You carry the foreigner inside*. This malady of doubleness, I argue, is the melancholy of race, a dis-ease of location and memory..." (Cheng 60). The key concepts in this citation involve Cheng's use of "sickness" and "doubleness;" in contrast with the people that Cheng analyzes, a white exile may be able to hide their foreign-ness by not speaking and adjusting their appearance. Both Pineau and Lê suffer from this particular affliction in that they have been longtime residents of France who are linguistically assimilated, but who had formative experiences of their own difference that caused emotional scarring. Pineau and Lê experience melancholia as a splitting of the ego which occurs between their French and Othered selves. The idealized version of the homeland results in this split; unable to mend the damage done to the ego by the rejection experienced in exile, the idealized homeland works as a defense mechanism that allows the melancholic to attempt to heal by finding self-worth through association with such a perfect place. However, because this ideal is a fantasy, any attempts to attach identity to it results in another blow to the fragile ego. In the chapters pertaining to these authors, I will examine the role of race in their melancholic epistolarity.

Nothomb represents a different and perhaps more confusing case. Although not racially Other in her “home” culture of Belgium, Nothomb spent a significant amount of time in her childhood and adolescence living in countries where she was Other because of her father’s career as a diplomat. In her works, Nothomb often portrays Japan as her homeland. Rather than merely longing for Belgium, she longs to return to the idealized version of Japan that she has constructed and attempts this return in many of her works.¹² In *Une forme de vie*, the idealized version of Japan has receded into the background in favor of a more pronounced fixation on Belgium. Why does this shift take place? Despite changing her fixation to Belgium rather than Japan, Nothomb’s protagonist Amélie in *Une forme de vie* remains an exile; rather than living in Belgium, she lives in Paris and frequently travels to Brussels.

As a result of each author’s exile, their protagonists experience the same displacement and have come to letter writing for the same reason that the author writes novels: as a textual exploration of trauma and pain in exile. Ruth Perry discusses the more productive nature of the pain that many epistolary novels explore: “Suffering brings consciousness in its wake, the consciousness of self, of psychological process, and although writing relieves the suffering somewhat, it also insists upon a simultaneous awareness of the pain” (112). For the protagonists in Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb’s novels, the consciousness of self that the letter-writing act provides is not a positive one; rather, it becomes an avenue for repetitive nostalgia that does not resolve the traumatic exile. Rejecting the idea that letter or journal writing can be cathartic, the protagonists may write about their suffering, but they are unable to resolve any of their psychological difficulties through the epistolary act. Pineau’s narrator finds more solace in the

¹² In this project, I will only examine two of the several works that I could include in this discussion: *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Biographie de la faim*. Two other works that specifically engage with Nothomb’s exile from and relationship to Japan are *Stupeurs et tremblements* and *Ni d’Eve ni d’Adam*.

oral recounting of her struggles than she does in her letters while Lê and Nothomb's correspondents merely perpetuate their melancholia through obsessive epistolarity.

In the optimal epistolary act, the letter author uses the space of the missive for reflection that strengthens her sense of self and the cohesiveness of her ego. However, the letters written from exile by the narrators in this project do not allow for such positive results. Because of the initial damage done by exile, the authors and their protagonists utilize epistolarity to write back to the sense of themselves and their country that they lost. However, these attempts to return to a home and to a wholeness that never existed only exacerbate the melancholia. The letter becomes a home in and of itself, a home that allows the author to remain connected to the past without having to return to the native country. The home space of the letter makes it possible for the correspondent to avoid the inevitable alienating experience that a return home supplies. Carol Boyce Davies argues the following about black diasporic experience:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it. Still home is contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation. (113)

Desperately seeking the feeling of "home" in an exiled or diasporic setting, letters become a space in which the letter writer searches for the feeling of a unified self, free from the conflicts of the new and the old countries.

In some cases, however, this desperate search for home and the resulting melancholia might add to an author's literary production. In the case of Pineau, Lê, and Nothomb, the prevalence of certain themes in their *œuvres* causes one to wonder if suffering in exile has made them into the authors that they are today. As Hannah Segal argues in "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Aesthetics":

...all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair – it is then that we must re-create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life” (Segal 390).

From these “dead fragments,” the writers and their narrators attempt to repair their “ruined internal world” through correspondence. Unfortunately, because one desires to repair the ego does not mean that one is capable of doing so. In fact, the narrators perpetuate their traumatic exile in their letters rather than resolving it. Because epistolarity implies a dialogue (even if the letters are one-sided, there is the implication of a recipient whose response the reader can imagine), the narrators in this project re-create their lives by writing to a trusted correspondent that represents part of their fractured self.

The melancholic epistolary texts that I examine in this project share several features that establish a pattern in these contemporary novels that could be explored in other contexts:

- Traumatic exile: In the case of each author and protagonist examined here, each has had a profoundly damaging experience in exile that has pushed her to writing.
- Idealized homeland: In each novel, the protagonist/narrator creates an ideal version of the homeland that serves as a defense mechanism¹³ against the troubled relationship that she has with the new country and the native country. Finding a home in neither, the narrator typically begins writing letters in a nostalgic desire to connect with the imaginary place.

¹³ In *The Development of Defense Mechanisms: Theory, Research, and Assessment*, Phebe Cramer notes the following: “...defense mechanisms protect the ego by ‘warding off’ anxiety and guilty feelings” (5). She states that these guilty feelings are often the result of the loss of narcissistic fulfillment from an important external person. Cramer continues: “The infantile ego experiences this loss of narcissistic supplies as hunger or as a fear of a loss of certain pleasurable feeling, such as well-being, protection, and security – feelings that regulate self-cohesions and, later, self-esteem” (6).

- Trusted confidant as addressee: Pineau's Man Ya speaks her oral letters to God; Pineau's young narrator writes letters to her grandmother, Man Ya. Lê's narrator writes to her father, her friend Sirius, and herself. Nothomb's Melvin Mapple writes to Amélie Nothomb, his favorite author while Amélie writes brief missives back to him, but mostly writes metadiscourse to herself and her readers. The ability to write for the protagonists is contingent upon their being able to write to someone whom they feel understands them. For Pineau and Lê, the trusted confidant is also an extension of the idealized homeland.
- Mirrored/paired characters: This concept is closely related to, but not entirely explained by the "trusted confidant" feature. In this situation, the author creates a symbiotic relationship between the letter writer and their confidant in which they share personality traits, personal difficulties, and identity troubles, and their experiences mirror one another. This mirroring of characters indicates the split of the ego of both the protagonists and their authors that surfaces as a part of melancholia.
- Narcissism: Another feature that stems from melancholic suffering is narcissism. Narcissism also serves as a defense mechanism against the devaluation of self that occurs in exile and in turn in the melancholia that has resulted from traumatic exile. The degree to which the letter writers demonstrate narcissistic tendencies intensifies as the melancholic nature of the novels becomes stronger; in other words, Pineau's young narrator is only mildly narcissistic while Nothomb's Amélie is pathologically so.

- Self-destruction: This final feature applies only to Lê and Nothomb's characters, but the letter writers' self-destructive tendencies are such a striking element of each text that I cannot ignore them despite their lack of pertinence in Pineau. In Lê and Nothomb's novels, the narrators' melancholia results in a pressing need to destroy the self and thus also the long-suffering ego.

Following this list of elements, I have decided to examine the three novels of this project in order from least melancholic to most melancholic. In chapter one, I will examine Gisèle Pineau's 1996 novel, *L'Éxil selon Julia*. Mostly narrated from the perspective of a young woman, the novel does not follow a traditional epistolary form; in fact, less than a third of the text is letters. However, the appearance of letters at specific points of melancholic trouble contributes to my argument about contemporary Francophone epistolarity. The narrator recounts her experiences as a young black woman living in 1960s France and explores her family relationships, mostly focusing on her Guadeloupean grandmother, Man Ya. Man Ya was brought to France by her son (the narrator's father) to leave her abusive marriage, but Man Ya refuses assimilation and struggles extensively with homesickness. As a result of this struggle, Man Ya frequently prays to God, composing one-sided oral letters to him in an effort to cope with her displacement. For the narrator, Man Ya becomes a sustaining presence through her lessons about Guadeloupean culture and history. Man Ya eventually departs to return home after her homesickness becomes debilitating, and the narrator experiences significant psychological difficulties as the result of the separation. To maintain her connection to her grandmother, the narrator writes a series of letters to Man Ya, which remain unanswered. For both the narrator and Man Ya, exile and racial melancholia are crippling. Although their respective melancholias stem from different events and geographical locations, it represents a similar destructive cycle which

the letters attempt to assuage. Guadeloupe is the center of identity for both characters, and the separation from the homeland provokes a search for it in the epistolary gesture; for these reasons, the letters end for both Man Ya and the narrator when each makes her return to the Antilles because they no longer need to write in search of a home. However, as the narrator's letters stop, she describes an idealized version of the Antilles that does not give an accurate picture of the difficulties she would have making cultural and linguistic adjustments from her life in France. In this way, the constructed view of Martinique and Guadeloupe becomes a defense mechanism that she cannot relinquish. While the ending chapters of Pineau's novel are significantly more hopeful than the works by the authors that follow, this denial demonstrates a similar struggle with melancholia.

In chapter two, I will examine Linda Lê's repeated use of the letter throughout her texts. Beginning with her 1992 short story "Vinh L." and continuing to her 2010 novel *Cronos*, the letter functions as a central object, and Lê's pattern of use endows significant meaning to the form. As Lê cultivates the repetitive image, she also creates an association between epistolarity and the death of her beloved father. Because of the intense father/letter association, the letter becomes the locus of Lê's melancholia after the loss of her father. The main text that I will examine, *Lettre morte*, is a one-sided epistolary monologue in which the narrator writes about her father, but the text indicates that the protagonist's melancholic responses have an earlier basis: in the exile from Vietnam in France that removed her from her father's care. The themes of father, homeland, and exile run throughout all of Lê's narratives. In this chapter, I will establish the melancholic patterns of Lê's epistolarity and will discuss her portrayals of incest and narcissism as further manifestations of melancholia.

In chapter three, I will analyze Amélie Nothomb's 2010 novel *Une forme de vie*, the only text in this group to contain the pretense of an actual epistolary exchange. The text begins after the fictional Amélie receives a letter from an American soldier named Melvin Mapple. When compared with the first two authors that I am examining, Nothomb could be seen as an unusual choice for this study. I cannot apply the same postcolonial theories to her works, and yet, like Pineau and Lê, she experiences significant trouble due to a life of repeated exiles. The child of a Belgian diplomat, Nothomb moved repeatedly with her family as her father's assignments changed, and of these exiles, her departure from Japan and from her beloved nanny, Nishio-san, at the age of five constituted the most painful blow; in her works and in her life since this first exile, Nothomb has attempted to return to the Japan of her early childhood. While she engages with this theme less in her most recent works, her protagonists bear the markings of these exiles and the melancholia that they have engendered. I begin this chapter by examining two of Nothomb's earlier works, *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Biographie de la faim* as explanatory texts that shed light on *Une forme de vie* and Nothomb's pattern of narcissism, self-destructive behavior, and dark humor.

This project contributes to the ongoing but limited conversation about epistolarity and marginalized women. While there have been dissertations in the last twenty years like Kai-Ling Liu's *Unsent/Unanswered Letter in Epistolary Fiction by Modern Women Writers of Color* (1994) that have dealt with similar themes, there has been no full-length published work that takes on the revival of the epistolary narrative among Francophone women authors. Liu's dissertation corresponds with the theoretical resurgence of epistolarity in feminist academic circles, but because that resurgence waned at the end of the 1990s for the most part, the letter narratives that I explore and the thematic patterns that they possess have largely remained

unnoticed as critics have shifted their attention to other fields. In the modern texts by Pineau, L  , and Nothomb that I explore, the authors combine the letter with other genres to transform the form into a unique narrative venture that shifts to meet their authorial needs. However, with these transformations, questions begin to arise about the authors' use of the epistolary form; specifically, what makes this novel epistolary? How is it different from a journal or an interior monologue?

CHAPTER 1: *L'EXIL SELON JULIA*

I. Introduction

The first of the three novels that I will discuss represents a departure from the traditional epistolary texts that I described in the introduction to this project. In Gisèle Pineau's 1996 novel *L'Exil selon Julia*, the author eschews any clear genre through the simultaneous use of the fictional and autobiographical and through a shifting narrative voice that speaks for different characters at different times. In the novel, the adolescent narrator is the child of Guadeloupean immigrants to France who struggles against French society's racism in the 1960s. Pineau's narrator experiences extensive identity confusion as "négropolitains" (black people of former colonies who were born and came of age in France) that mirrors that of her author; neither Guadeloupean nor French, the identities of the author and the narrator exist at a crossroads which the narrative structure mimics through its fluidity. As Pineau has revealed in interviews, she based her narrator's experiences on her own. In one interview, she reveals her experiences with the other children at school:

Q: Vous fréquentiez très peu de camarades d'école? D'abord, à cette époque-là, on n'avait pas encore une vie sociale organisée...

R: J'avais des camarades mais dès qu'il y avait un petit problème, c'était tout de suite: "Nègresse, retourne dans ton pays, en Afrique! Va dans ta case en paille!" Ce sont des blessures difficiles à dépasser...(Makward and Pineau 1204)

This rejection marks the author; despite being a French citizen, her fellow countrymen immediately distinguish her as Other based on the color of her skin. Mastery of the language and cultural assimilation do not prove to be enough to bridge the gap between Pineau and French society. For Pineau, as for countless other authors from former colonies, marginalization becomes a focal point of her narratives. Focusing on the experience of exile for people of color, Pineau's texts like *L'Exil selon Julia* and *Un Papillon dans la cité* portray the diasporic situation

(of which Pineau's family is a part) and its potential damage to the psyche; the protagonists in Pineau's narratives spend their childhoods in France rather than in their families' countries of origin, and, thus, their concept of self is highly connected to French rejection since as children they would initially be incapable of formulating a counter-self that rejects the French responses.

L'Exil selon Julia opens with a series of racial epithets that will reappear several times throughout the course of the text. The narrative structure initially bears close resemblance to a diary or a memoir in which the narrator works to reconstruct her familial history. First, the narrator recounts the story of her parents' courtship and her father Maréchal's life as a soldier in the French army. Having provided these portraits, the narrator discusses her life as a small child in Guadeloupe and her family's subsequent moves to Africa and to France. Following the family's move to France, the narrator also discusses the arrival in France of Julia, her grandmother. Julia, or Man Ya as she is affectionately known, is the mother of the narrator's father and is a very traditional Guadeloupean woman. Maréchal forcibly removes Man Ya from her home in Routiers to get her away from her abusive marriage to his father Asdrubal. Because of her profound ties to her homeland, Man Ya experiences intense homesickness and repeatedly begs her son to send her back to Guadeloupe. During this period, Man Ya frequently prays to God, composing oral letters from her position of exile. She does not return immediately, and the French treat Man Ya with disdain because of the dark color of her skin and her inability to speak French. The narrator describes Man Ya's confrontations with racism as parallel to her own and describes her experiences in French schools as the only non-white child. Her skin color causes her to encounter extreme prejudice despite being a capable and interested student; in turn, she dreams of living in Guadeloupe with Man Ya and other children like her. On a positive note, Man Ya's presence during the narrator's initial schooling provides her with a counterbalance to

this racism and provides her with an education about her ancestors. Man Ya discusses slavery, a topic fastidiously avoided by the narrator's parents and her French education. However, while Man Ya enjoys life in France on some level because of her grandchildren, her desire to be with them is not enough to assuage her discomfort. The children are getting older, and after five years, Man Ya becomes so depressed that she stays in bed for days at a time.

After seeing his mother descend further into depression, the narrator's father relents and allows Man Ya to return to Guadeloupe. Upon Man Ya's departure, the novel's structure shifts from that of a diary to a series of one-sided letters from the narrator to the illiterate Man Ya. In the letters, the narrator describes her various daily activities and the fact that her father is considering returning to the Antilles if the French do not vote to keep his hero Charles de Gaulle as president. She also describes the hate-filled treatment she receives at the hands of her teacher, Madame Baron, who makes the narrator sit underneath the teacher's desk for hours at a time. This treatment provokes profound psychic trouble for the narrator; as a result, she turns to reading to find solace and finds *Le Journal d'Anne Franck* to comfort her. In her final letters, she tells Man Ya that she revealed Madame Baron's abuse to her sister. At the end of the epistolary section, De Gaulle leaves office, and the family moves to Martinique. The narrator describes her happiness at returning to the Antilles and at being with the rest of her family once again. Pineau moves away from the epistolary narrative once the narrator's return to her homeland begins and instead commences a poetic engagement with the narrator's experience of wonder at Caribbean life. The narrator presents the new experiences in the form of biblical plagues (locusts, frogs, etc.), but manages to maintain her wonderment despite the disturbing nature of the new things surrounding her. The novel's concluding paragraph mentions the death of Man Ya and gives the text a eulogistic feeling.

This structural crossroads thus represents the experience of Pineau, her narrator, and other Antilleans who battle French cultural assimilation while also desperately clinging to their respective island identities¹⁴. Terms like Homi Bhaba's "hybridity," Edouard Glissant's "créolisation," and Françoise Lionnet's "métissage" have gained particular traction in postcolonial theory due to the need to understand areas of cultural contact that resulted from colonization. Coming about in conjunction with these evolving terms have been several literary movements, of which the most important to this discussion is the Créolité movement.¹⁵ However, Créolité's revalorization of Antillean language and culture is problematic for authors unable or unwilling to write entirely in Créole. This latter category has particularly appeared to target Antillean women authors. Pineau could be excluded by the Créolistes from their ranks based on the fact that she uses French as her language of expression and spent her childhood in France rather than the Antilles. This exclusion represents a second rejection for Pineau; she is not French enough nor is she Antillean enough. This in-betweenness produces a significant

¹⁴ Beginning with Aimé Césaire's literature and theory in the late 1930s, authors examined their particular experiences as Antilleans who left their Caribbean homeland to study in the *métropole* as young adults. Armed with their education and affected by their experiences abroad, Césaire and other authors begin to engage with the history of abuses heaped upon the blacks, Hindus, and island natives by the French colonizers. As they begin to tell their own stories as Césaire does in his seminal work, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, they begin to shed light on the Antilles's troubling past. In *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Césaire rejected the exoticism that had plagued works about the Antilles before him and preferred to portray the pain, misery, and poverty that tortured families like his own. This work is a trauma narrative in its own right like the novels examined in this project; Césaire's troubled relationship with Martinique is a precursor to the works of almost all of the Antillian authors and poets who have followed. He writes of the historic trauma that slavery and colonialism inflicted upon his ancestors:

Et ce pays cria pendant des siècles que nous sommes des bêtes brutes; que les pulsations de l'humanité s'arrêtent aux portes de la négrierie; que nous sommes un fumier ambulante hideusement prometteur de cannes tendres et de coton soyeux et l'on nous marquait au fer rouge et nous dormions dans nos excréments et l'on nous vendait sur les places et l'aune de drap anglais et la viande salée d'Irlande coûtaient moins cher que nous... (Césaire 38-39)

¹⁵ Inspired by Glissant's concepts of *Antillanité* and *créolisation*, the novelists Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant along with the linguist Jean Bernabé published *Lettres créoles* and *Éloge de la créolité* as manifestos of Creole identity. In *Éloge de la créolité*, the three authors proclaim in the tract's opening sentences: "Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques, nous nous proclamons Créoles. Cela sera pour nous une attitude intérieure, mieux: une vigilance, ou mieux encore, une sorte d'enveloppe mentale au mitan de laquelle se bâtira notre monde en pleine conscience du monde" (*Éloge* 13). With the emphasis on Créole literature and culture rather than the French culture that these authors had assimilated, the literary revalorization continued by fully rejecting the dominant French culture.

experience of racial melancholia because Pineau and in turn her narrator have no culture to which they belong fully. The Créolistes' exclusionary beliefs limit the possibilities of Antillean literature according to Maryse Condé, another female author who composes her novels entirely in French. Condé has published a critique of the linguistic limitations of Créolité in her article, "Chercher nos vérités." She argues:

Sur le plan linguistique, les Antillais ne peuvent plus demeurer prisonniers de l'opposition binaire : créole/français. Celle-ci n'est qu'un héritage de l'obsession coloniale entre vainqueur et victime. Faussement révolutionnaire, cette dichotomie linguistique est en réalité passiste et nie les découverts fondamentaux sur l'ordre et le pouvoir sociétal impliqué dans toute langue. Raphaël Confiant reproche à Césaire de n'avoir pas écrit en créole nous étonne. Ne sait-il pas qu'il suffit pour l'écrivain de trouver son langage au-delà des langues, maternelles ou non ? Césaire a forgé la parole césairienne, c'est tout ce qui nous importe. (Condé 309)

Pineau, like Césaire, writes in French despite its traumatic associations because it is her native language, not Créole. Despite relying on French as her main language of expression, Pineau orients her novels to the lives of Antillean people, whether they live in France or in Martinique or Guadeloupe. Taking into consideration the experiences of people across continents, her work represents a diasporic perspective, and this diasporic perspective also illustrates the historic difficulties of people of color from the Antilles and explores the current traumas of those who continue to live with this legacy.

Through a comparative engagement with literature, Pineau has developed her own version of Créolité that blends additional outside influences into her Antillean-oriented perspective. As a non-native speaker of Creole who lived in France for much of her childhood, Pineau has also found other authorial influences that are not a part of the Créoliste movement; as a woman and a feminist, the alienating nature of the movement has provoked her to search for authors from other diasporic backgrounds. When asked about her authorial influences in an interview with Nadège Veldwachter, Pineau states:

Even though Simone [Schwarz-Bart] was a pioneer, it took almost another ten years for this kind of writing to be given recognition. Her text was a revelation for me, a diamond. So were Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, or Maya Angelou. I recognize myself a lot in Afro-American literatures. In my childhood, I was a Black on a continent full of Whites, so I did not have the same experiences as the writers of the Creolity movement, I feel, therefore, closer to African-American writers than to writers of Creolity. (185)

Separating herself from the Créolistes because she does not share in the same experiences, Pineau is freer to proceed with her work without the same constraints. Thus, she makes use of forms that others may find too antiquated or European to her benefit in *L'Exil selon Julia*, namely the epistolary narrative. Her transformation of the letter-centered text into a work of Créolité mirrors the inventiveness that Pineau's African American counterparts have used in working with Western narrative structures. Influential texts by African Americans also display the experiences of characters who have had traumatizing experiences of their race and nationality, and Pineau creates her narrator and Man Ya in dialogue with these American authors and their characters¹⁶.

Pineau displays a deep understanding of psychology throughout her exploration of black Antillean subjectivity, and this deep understanding stems from Pineau's earlier career as a

¹⁶ While *L'Exil selon Julia* is a work of fictional autobiography for Pineau, both the narrator and Man Ya create their autobiographies in their texts. For both, as for African American authors, this is an act of rebellion against the silencing forces of Western culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has underscored the rebellious nature of autobiography in African-American literature in *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*:

Of the various genres that comprise the African-American literary tradition, none has played a role as central as has black autobiography. For hundreds of black authors, the most important written statement that they could make seems to have been the publication of their life stories. Through autobiography, these writers could, at once, shape a public 'self' in language, and protest the degradation of their ethnic group by the multiple forms of American racism. The ultimate form of protest, certainly, was to register in print the existence of a 'black self' that had transcended the limitations and restrictions that racism had placed on the personal development of the black individual." (*Bearing Witness* 3)

Man Ya's and the narrator's accounts illustrate the need to speak in the face of annihilation and to respond to the abuses historically heaped upon black Antilleans. For Pineau's two characters, the power of the word for positive self-construction is evident, but Man Ya's use of words is not limited to the written – as Gates shows to be the case for African-Americans: "The will to power for black Americans was the will to write; and the predominant mode that this writing would assume was the shaping of a black self in words" (*Bearing Witness* 4). Pineau erases the hierarchy between the written letter and the spoken prayer, rendering them both effective instruments to cultivate subjectivity for her characters.

psychiatric nurse. In her essay “Écrire en tant que noire,” Pineau addresses her experiences working with troubled Antilleans:

Infirmière en hospital psychiatrique, je suis sans cesse confrontée à la folie de ces Antillais qui ballottent et butent, comme caisse vides à fond de cale, incapables de s’accepter en tant qu’Antillais-Créole, méprisant leur couleur de peau, revendiquant leur seule africanité ou francité, rêvant d’un retour au pays des ancêtres africains ou bien d’une seconde naissance sur le continent de la civilisation européenne. Les griffures de l’esclavage, la morsure des fers, les flagellations et les sévices de l’asservissement dans les champs de cannes ne sont jamais loin, à peine étouffés. (294-295)

This passage also describes a central conflict in *L’Exil selon Julia* that contributes to the young narrator’s struggles with melancholia. Surrounded by the profoundly racist society of 1960s France, the narrator learns disdain for herself and her skin color from which she only finds relief in the engaging Guadeloupean stories that Man Ya tells. Man Ya, perhaps reaching out to her grandchildren in an effort to work through her own troubled history with her race, cannot fully leave behind the trauma of slavery or of her abuse by her husband. This chapter will first examine Man Ya’s struggles with exile and racial melancholia before proceeding to a discussion of her oral letters to God. In the sections following those dealing with Man Ya, I will explore the young girl narrator’s similar experience of exile, racism, and melancholia that provokes her to begin writing letters to Man Ya. In an effort to recover from these melancholic troubles, both characters repress their psychological struggles and write letters in an attempt to cope. However, letter-writing provides little resolution to their difficulties; Man Ya and the narrator only experience resolution – at least momentarily – when they return to Guadeloupe, the idealized homeland formed by nostalgia.

II. Man Ya’s Exile and Melancholia

In Pineau’s narrative, the character of Man Ya allows us to glimpse the historic trauma endured by many black women in the Antilles. Man Ya first appears in the novel when the

narrator's father, Maréchal, kidnaps her to take her to France with his family and remove her from her husband Asdrubal's abuse. In contrast with poor, uneducated Man Ya, the narrator describes Asdrubal as fairer skinned and an excellent French speaker. Aside from skin color, his linguistic abilities demonstrate that he is a man of good standing. Adding to these two strengths, he also is an officer in the French army, another mark of prestige in the Antilles in the early twentieth century. However, he often uses his status to trample over others out of a sense of entitlement. The narrator describes Asdrubal's work as a boss on a plantation:

Asdrubal, quand il était dans sa jeunesse jetant sa gourme, à cause de ses yeux délavés et ses cheveux crantés, toutes les donzelles se couchaient pour lui. Quand il venait sur son cheval de gèreur, avec son casque colonial blanc, sa chicote à la main...au loin, on aurait dit un Blanc-pays. On ne l'aimait pas dans les plantations. Peut-être à cause de sa peau claire, il se croyait un droit sur les travailleurs nègres ou indiens, sur les femmes aussi. (Pineau 95)

This passage evokes the Antilles' plantation past, despite the fact that this scene occurred significantly after abolition. Asdrubal, on his horse, wearing his white colonial helmet, is reminiscent of an overseer, and his treatment of the workers in the cane fields displays the same disdain for them as an overseer would for slaves. Proud that he could "pass," he exercises his dominance without consideration for the system that he is perpetuating. Considering his abusive relationship with Man Ya, this passage's final words are also striking. Asdrubal's superiority is over not only those with darker skin but also over women, and this attitude is apparent in his treatment of his wife. In comparison with the powerful Asdrubal, Man Ya is doubly marginalized as dark-skinned and as a woman.

Contrasting with Asdrubal's power and status, Man Ya and her mother are menial workers. In the novel, Man Ya has the opportunity to continue school as a child, but because her mother needs her to watch the children while she cuts sugarcane, Man Ya never finishes her education and is doomed to a domestic life that perpetuates her lower status. By teaching Man

Ya her place, her mother reinforces the lowliness of her sex and skin color and emphasizes her lack of beauty. Man Ya remembers her mother's instructions: " 'Qui veut du respect s'en procure! Une négresse doit racheter les péchés de sa race. Une négresse noire doit montrer la blancheur de son âme et agir dans le bien. Une négresse noire, laide à cheveux grainés doit mériter, plus que tout autre, sa place au ciel. Ne te dérespecte pas!' aimait à dire sa manman" (Pineau 73). Having internalized her mother's comments, Man Ya consistently refers to herself as dark-skinned and ugly throughout the text. As Frantz Fanon stated in *Peau noire, masques blancs*: "Le péché est nègre comme la vertu est blanche. Tous ces blancs réunis, le revolver au poing, ne peuvent pas avoir tort. Je suis coupable. Je ne sais pas de quoi, mais je sens que je suis un misérable" (112). The damaging effects of slavery haunt Pineau's narrator's account of Man Ya's youth and influenced Fanon's descriptions of race relations in the 1950s. However, Fanon's experience of racism occurred during his exile in France with people who were, in fact, of another race; Man Ya's situation is more complicated. The racism that she has internalized comes from people of the same race. Mirroring her mother's perspective, she confirms through her actions later that she must withstand the abuse that she experiences because that is her lot in life. Her sex also contributes to the seeming futility of the situation; whereas Fanon had the opportunity to pursue higher education, Man Ya's sole choice as a young woman was to care for her brothers and sisters. Pineau emphasizes Man Ya's lack of options and describes the misfortunes of her life with a great deal of sympathy, evoking this in her readers.

In her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver performs an extensive analysis of trauma and the postcolonial condition; as a part of her study, she concludes that many of the difficulties experienced by postcolonial people of color stems from their quest for recognition in a white society that refuses to give it. Oliver's second chapter, "Domination, Multiculturalism,

and the Pathology of Recognition,” comments on Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* and briefly analyzes it as a melancholic text. Oliver’s interpretation of Fanon has implications for our understanding of Man Ya because her relationship with Asdrubal is parallel to that of Fanon and the white people that surround him as he studies in France. In both cases, the sufferer (Man Ya or Fanon) struggle with an understanding of themselves that they have gained from the oppressor: “Because the oppressed are forced to compare themselves with their oppressors who put themselves up as the norm or standard against which the oppressed are themselves found inferior, the oppressed are thrown into a vicious cycle of finding their own self-worth by virtue of this impossible comparison” (Oliver 36). Oliver views this “redoubled alienation” as indicative of a turn towards melancholia because of how such an experience would result in a loss of self-worth. For the oppressed, the oppressor becomes the ego ideal who enforces standards (of whiteness) to which the oppressed can never live up. In Oliver’s interpretation, the oppressed introjects an objectified ideal of herself as Other. This objectified ideal is a forced identification that the oppressor requires, and as the oppressed understands her status as Other, she loses the cultural identity that she possessed before as she knew herself as a “loveable and loved ego” (Oliver 37). Thus, for the oppressed, the lost love object is the self as originally comprehended: “When the child or young adult begins to experience the racism of her culture, she is put in the position of Other, longing for a sense of self as belonging and loved that is missing within the dominant culture” (Oliver 37). Interestingly, the “self” functions as both subject and object in Oliver’s examination. For the oppressed, this becomes the center of the struggle against the trauma of racism: how does one become a subject despite also being an object in the eyes of others?

Pineau offers little resolution to this question. The initial wounds of Man Ya's childhood give way to further abuse as an adult. As the narrator renders Man Ya's monologic account of how her relationship began with Asdrubal, we hear her describe: "Il m'a voulue, il m'a eue. On raconte qu'il a cherché la plus laide des négresses noires pour faire offense et bailler de la honte à son papa. Il m'a jamais aimée ou si mal, d'une bien laide façon. J'étais comme un affront, un outrage...son esclave" (Pineau 95). Far from courting Man Ya at the beginning of the relationship, Asdrubal assumes the position of master with Man Ya as his slave. Asdrubal begins to abuse Man Ya and continues to do until Maréchal forces her to leave with him for France.

Thus, Man Ya experiences a postcolonial form of melancholia nearly identical to what Oliver decries. Man Ya refers to herself as "la plus laide des négresses noires" and appears to believe that she deserves nothing other than the abuse she receives. Through the abuse that she and her mother endure as dark-skinned women, Man Ya begins to see anyone who looks like her as Other and internalizes a racist construction into her ego. Unable to overcome the self-hatred that such an understanding entails, she marries the abusive Asdrubal. For Asdrubal's more affluent family, his marriage to a dark-skinned woman is shameful. He carries this view into the marriage and uses it as an excuse to treat Man Ya as his slave. Soon after the marriage, he is called away to fight in the colonies with the French army. She finally has a respite from his blows. Soon after, in the most significant appearance of letter imagery in the text, she surprisingly begins to receive love letters from him. The narrator describes the letters: "Pendant ses campagnes, le coquin envoyait des lettres où les flammes de l'amour flattaient le cœur de Julia...Monsieur disait rêver d'elle, sa Julia adorée entre toutes les femmes, négresse sans gamme ni dièse ni *do ré si* bémol. Il demandait pardon pour les jours anciens, le temps où il la rossait, par jeunesse et bêtise" (Pineau 69). In his letters, Asdrubal is playing the role of the

amorous epistolary man that has been set forth in the canonical works he would have encountered in his French education. For example, his manipulative nature mirrors that of Laclos's celebrated Valmont. Man Ya is enthralled by these letters written in perfect French; having received nothing but abuse from her husband, he can easily manipulate her with his beautiful words and promises. While in the beginning a neighborhood child would read the letters to her, the illiterate Man Ya decides that she wants to be able to read them for herself; thus, she attempts to learn to read. Asdrubal's return interrupts her lessons, and while she wishes for him to be like he was in his letters, he is the same man who left her for war: "Hélas, quand tu es revenu, tu étais le même Bourreau que le Seigneur m'avait donné pour ma vie sur la terre. J'ai pas couru sous les coups. Mais j'ai plus cherché à comprendre les écritures. J'ai plus caressé les lettres de France...Je les ai jetées au feu, je les ai enterrées au bas d'un pied de muscade" (Pineau 97-98). In destroying these letters, Man Ya also gives up learning to read and write. Understanding that she has been manipulated, she rejects the weapon of this manipulation: the written French language. She buries the letters to fully reject them and responds to the letters the only way that she knows how: through physical action. For Man Ya, the garden and the earth possess communicative possibilities; because she is illiterate, she cannot write a letter as a response, and the act of planting the letters is her way to express her dissatisfaction with Asdrubal's horrendous behavior. For Man Ya, the garden becomes a text that she can use to express herself through actions.

Indeed, when the narrator and her siblings attempt to teach Man Ya to write, the now old woman revolts against written language:

Ses lettres sont tellement mal formés, si grosses, incapables de se tenir droites sur les lignes du papier. Elles vacillent, se heurtent en grimaçant. J.U.L.I.A. J.U.L.I.A...Man Ya ne produit pas que des caractères malgracieux, contrefaits, malbâtis qui aiguisent

notre colère. Parfois, la craie se casse et avec elle l'espoir d'écrire dans son entier, sans hésiter, les cinq lettres qui la nomment au monde. (Pineau 96)

Man Ya claims that it is because she is an old woman that she cannot learn, but I contend that she blocks her own learning - whether consciously or unconsciously - as a response to Asdrubal's abuse and manipulation. Other critics like Dayna L. Oscherwitz argue that Man Ya's refusal of literacy is part of Pineau's alignment with Créolité, but her troubled relationship with Asdrubal's letters suggests a deeper connection.¹⁷ For Man Ya, the most significant source of trauma in her marriage is not the beatings that she receives in the beginning; for as "la plus laide des négresses noires," she believes she deserves such treatment. However, Asdrubal's love letters allow her to believe that she deserves more: to be so loved by a powerful light-skinned man bolsters her self-concept. When he shows his love to have only been in this writing, he may well have engendered a self-rupture that prohibits her from ever learning how to write herself, or, perhaps she is protesting his bad treatment of her by refusing to learn. Either way, her ongoing illiteracy stems, I would argue, from her marriage to Asdrubal.

Asdrubal's letters imply that he is accepting her into his privileged existence; he writes to her as his wife and equal. In this way, this epistolary exchange becomes a profound experience for Man Ya and her split ego. She finally relinquishes her objection as the ego ideal/Asdrubal begins to show love. However, Man Ya's positive change in identity is forestalled. When Asdrubal returns home, for she has not yet composed a letter on her own. In this way, she remains an object who is written to rather than a subject who writes. Asdrubal's return and the subsequent resuming of her beatings causes Man Ya to experience arrested development and

¹⁷ Please see: Dayna L. Oscherwitz, "Writing Over, Overwriting History: Politics and Language in Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* and *Femmes des Antilles*." *North-South Linkages and Connections in Continental and Diaspora African Literatures*. Ed. Edris Makward, Mark Lilleleht, and Ahmed Saber. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005. 355-366.

pronounced resentment; unable to fully return to her ego state from before his letters, she gives up on her dream of writing, but as we will see in the following examination, she does not give up her desire for self-expression. Because her melancholic experience of race is a constant presence in her life, Man Ya seeks to express herself despite it and is not always able to do so.

Having learned about the abuse that she has received from Asdrubal, the reader questions why Man Ya would be so desperate to return to him. From the time when she leaves with the narrator's family until her return to Guadeloupe, Man Ya laments having left Asdrubal behind: "Par des fois, il se trouve des personnes qui chavirent le destin. Mais, mon Dieu, Tu es témoin, j'ai jamais voulu délaisser Monsieur Asdrubal. Je priais seulement pour que la paix descende sur son âme et que les morts de la guerre viennent pas le poursuivre jusque dans son sommeil. Et même si je le criais Bourreau. Et même s'il me baillait rien d'autre que des coups" (Pineau 56). These statements appear significantly before Man Ya describes Asdrubal's abuse; Man Ya prays to God as she arrives in France and wants to make it abundantly clear that her son has taken her away against her will. While she does feel concern for Asdrubal, Man Ya also wants to make her situation very clear to God, whom she desperately fears that she has offended. This citation highlights Man Ya's pity for her husband's posttraumatic suffering stemming from his experiences as a soldier at war; while praying for him to not suffer from his own demons, she mentions her nickname for him - "Bourreau," a name she has given him because of the violent whippings that he gives her. She simultaneously wants to return to him and criticizes his treatment of her. However, Man Ya is only able to mildly criticize her husband. Rather than revealing her true anger with him, she makes an allusion to a nickname that the reader will not understand until much later. Through descriptions of her husband such as this one, she exposes her ambivalence towards him.

In the novel, Man Ya treats her light-skinned husband Asdrubal with deference, and yet, she speaks mockingly of the French and refers to France as “un pays de désolation.” In one of her first prayers upon arriving in France, “Elle dit: ‘Mon Dieu, la froideur entre dans la chair et perce jusqu’aux os. Tous ces Blancs-là comprennent pas mon parler. Et cette façon qu’ils ont à me regarder comme si j’étais une créature sortie de la côte de Lucifer. Faut voir ça pour le croire. À mon retour en Guadeloupe, je raconterai à Léa que Là-Bas, la France, c’est un pays de désolation’” (Pineau 55). She submits to her husband’s whippings, but she asserts her critical opinion of the French for being fools to live in such a cold place. She does not evince the internalized inferiority complex that the reader finds in her marriage to Asdrubal. In further interactions between Man Ya and the French, she never reacts to their belief in their own superiority by acquiescing. Taking the one scene as an example, Man Ya becomes worried about the children one afternoon because the weather has taken a turn for the worse. In order to prevent them from being soaked during their walk home from school, she goes to meet them with their coats. When searching for a coat for herself, she puts on her son’s military *képi* and notices that she receives odd looks from white people as she walks. She holds her head high despite the looks and reaches the school. Upon her arrival, police officers confront her in French and speak to her with disgust. Unable to respond to the men, Man Ya behaves with dignity and refuses to prostrate herself in front of the police officers.¹⁸ If Man Ya’s feelings of inferiority do not extend to her dealings with the *Français de souche*, does she experience racial melancholia? I believe that Man Ya’s problematic experience with skin color is rooted in the Guadeloupean culture and her racial trauma from childhood and adolescence.

¹⁸ For an engaging discussion of this scene, consult: Lúcia M. Suárez, “Gisèle Pineau: Writing the Dimensions of Migration.” *World Literature Today*. 75: 3-4 (Summer-Autumn 2001): 8-21.

Just as the reader wonders why Man Ya would want to stay with the abusive Asdrubal, her longing for Guadeloupe provokes similar questions. Reading statements that refer to Man Ya as Asdrubal's slave, one can assert that their relationship serves as an allegory for the wider trauma inflicted on people of color in the Antilles. In discussing her grandmother, the narrator notes the extent of the suffering that her ancestors had endured in Guadeloupe and the attachment to the land that somehow continues:

À marcher sur une terre qui a tant saigné, à respirer en continu les relents des souffrances d'esclavage qui ne sont pas parties, comme ça, dans le vent de l'Abolition, à sucer l'os de la désespérance, faut comprendre la rage, aussi la peur. Et peser l'insignifiance des rires, les éclats de courage, la jalousie. On ne peut pas juger. Julia est déjà habituée à tout ça. Sa terre aimée l'a jetée combien de fois, et puis l'a ramassée. C'est la même qu'elle veut vivre, en Guadeloupe. (Pineau 38)

Just as with Asdrubal's beatings, Man Ya remains drawn to her homeland despite her traumatic knowledge of the island's past. This passage reflects little hope and a significant amount of frustration with Guadeloupean life, but in the final sentences, the description represses this lack of satisfaction and instead states that the troubles that Man Ya has experienced have no bearing on her love for her homeland. Thus, Man Ya recreates her ambivalent relationship with her beloved yet abusive Guadeloupe in her similar relationship with Asdrubal.

In another description of Guadeloupe by the narrator, she continues to recount stories that Man Ya has told about her experiences as a young woman and her enduring love for her Guadeloupe. In another passage where the narrator retells Man Ya's stories, she writes:

[Man Ya] ...nous raconte – personne n'avoue donner crédit à ses paroles – qu'en Guadeloupe, des amis du Diable ont pouvoir de s'envoler, tourner en chiens, suspendre le cours des rivières et démonter la vie. Elle a déjà été courcée par des diablesses à pieds fourchus et doigts crochus. Elle a vu la nuit en plein jour et le jour se lever au mitan d'une nuit sans lune. Des frissons nous saisissent en ses épouvantables évocations. Mais elle continue à raconter et driver à l'aise dans ces cauchemars, pour retrouver ce cher pays perdu...Mais elle nous mène aussitôt à son jardin et nous échappons aux méchants...Elle le dresse pour nous comme un lieu merveilleux où toutes espèces

d'arbres, plantes et fleurs se multiplient dans une verdure accablante, quasi miraculeuse, argentée çà et là d'une lumière qui ne diffuse qu'au seul cœur de Routhiers. (Pineau 17)

The supernatural and the pastoral play equal parts in this description, and this combination constitutes an excellent example of Man Ya's conflicted construction of Guadeloupe as a land of plenty where wicked things happen. These wicked things, rather than being the work of actual people living on the island, are the work of demons that plague the unlucky black people who live there. Man Ya "...suppose qu'une malédiction pèse sur les Nègres. On a maudit cette race depuis le temps de l'Ancien Testament." (Pineau 38). This account removes agency from the Guadeloupean people and responsibility from their white oppressors. The Guadeloupeans are not responsible for the trouble that ails them, but must bear this as descendants of slaves. Man Ya's only recourse against the curse is her devotion to God; divorcing herself from the need to control the supernatural occurrences on the island as a whole, she finds an alternative space where she reigns supreme. Describing this space at the end of this passage, the narrator emphasizes the power that Man Ya sees in her garden in Routiers. Downtrodden in every other area of her life, Man Ya has control over the production of her garden. Having abandoned the dream of written expression, Man Ya feels slight relief from the surrounding racism in her garden; working to heal her wounds, she views herself as capable and worthy based on her gardening abilities: "Manier la terre, la tourner, la sentir entre ses doigts, l'exalte. Elle fait sienne cette terre... Le travail de la terre lui donne vie, la sustente" (Pineau 67). For Man Ya, her garden in Routiers is the location of her stable identity; when she is removed from the garden and the roots that she has planted there, she is in exile.

In an article entitled "New World Pastoral: The Caribbean Garden and Emplacement in Gisèle Pineau and Shani Mootoo," Sarah Phillips Casteel discusses the image of the garden in another of Pineau's novels, but her examination is equally valid in the context of *L'Exil selon*

Julia. Casteel refers to “the garden as the site of the recovery of a prelapsarian identity” and traces the image of the garden throughout Caribbean criticism, paying particular attention to Glissant’s *Discours antillais* (14). Although she also discusses the problematic aspects of the image (its associations with plantations, etc.), she states: “Traditionally, New World Pastoral [the garden image] suggests the possibility of regeneration and the foundation of new Caribbean society cleansed of the ills of the past. Moreover, because a stable relationship between identity and place is assumed, the garden is a fixed site where such generation must take place” (Casteel 20). While Casteel notes that Pineau works to redefine this in her later novels, Pineau seems to embrace it in the character of Man Ya. Until Man Ya returns to her garden, she will remain adrift; the pleasure that she feels in physically manipulating the earth corresponds with one of her only methods of communicating. Without this connection, she is not able to express herself. While maintaining the link to her garden through her memory, Man Ya assuages her initial homesickness. Man Ya is also able to alleviate her homesickness by helping to raise the narrator and her siblings. Noting that the children are not learning about the history of their homeland, Man Ya attempts to educate them. This education provides a significant link to Guadeloupe that helps Man Ya to feel less exiled, despite the violent trauma that such lessons require her to describe.

After five years in France, however, she loses sight of her purpose. She no longer feels of use as the children grow older, and she becomes intensely homesick. The narrator describes her suffering: “Le manque du pays se manifeste en tous lieux et à toute heure. Il apparaît dans l’absence de couleurs au ciel de l’esprit voyageur qui vit de nostalgie. Endurer ce manque, le pomponner ou le couvrir, c’est souffrances assurées et soupirs. C’est habiter Là-Bas, habité par le Pays” (Pineau 121). While no precise incident provokes Man Ya’s nostalgia for her homeland,

Pineau has the reader believe that this depression results from the traumatic experience of exile. Homesickness is insidious and appears at will; the unpredictable nature of these memories and thoughts has a destructive effect on Man Ya.

Pineau describes Man Ya's attempts to mentally return home: "L'esprit de Man Ya a coutume de monter et descendre ainsi entre Guadeloupe et France. Ce n'est pas une affaire pour elle. Même si son corps est condamné à rester ici-là, ça ne change rien. Il lui suffit de rentrer dans les profondeurs qu'elle couve au mitan de son âme" (Pineau 68). In addition to her habit of going back in her imagination, Man Ya's work with the children and her prayers help her to maintain her connection with the island. However, these mental exercises also indicate a pathological response because of her repetition of the act.

Eventually, prayers and memories are no longer enough to sustain Man Ya in her exile. Under a version of house arrest in the family apartment, Man Ya has little access to the outdoors and no access to her garden. Desperately searching for a replacement object to which to attach herself, she comes up empty handed and feels increasing pressure due to her exile. Sam Haigh reads Man Ya's entire experience in France as a melancholic response to exile. In his insightful article "Migration and Melancholia: From Kristeva's 'Dépression nationale' to Pineau's 'Maladie de l'exil,'" Haigh examines Man Ya's response to these overwhelming feelings: "From the start, she experiences her exile as 'le manque de pays' – as a lack, a loss, a wound, and as the prospect of returning to Guadeloupe gradually fades, she sinks into full-blown depression, becomes physically ill, and refuses to leave her bed, suffering from what her family names '[la] maladie de l'exil'" (244). Sensing the increasing hopelessness of her situation, Pineau's narrator discusses how Man Ya nourishes her sadness: "Nourrir ce manque, c'est acheter du poisson d'eau douce en France, le coucher dans une saumure d'imitation" (Pineau 121). Man Ya's life in

France so often seems to be a pale and unhappy imitation of her life in Guadeloupe. Everything – the weather, her isolation, the flavorless food – reminds her that she is in exile. In desiring to recreate the food of home, Man Ya also reflects on the herbs and plants that she could grow in her garden. However, there is no space for her to recreate her paradise in Routiers. While she is able to maintain feelings of agency through her prayers to God, her longing for the food of home and of the power she felt in her garden cause a melancholic response. Guadeloupe becomes an increasingly distant memory: “En cet autrefois, Man Ya ne parle plus, recèle ces contes. Son génie s’éteint et ses idées d’éducation (travailler, travailler, travailler...) ne viennent plus agacer nos oreilles” (Pineau 123). As she descends into silence, she also refuses to leave her bed: “Il y a un temps, Man Ya refuse de quitter la couche. Un genre de mélancolie la terrasse. Elle git sur les draps...Elle est là, sans être là” (Pineau 123). Man Ya is unable to conceptualize herself outside of Guadeloupe, and her ego has absorbed her lost love object, Guadeloupe. Because of this, melancholic Man Ya does not process the grief of her loss normally. While she originally makes mental voyages back to Guadeloupe as a coping mechanism, these “trips” result in increased difficulties. Maintaining an obsessive connection to the island, she refuses to adapt to her new surroundings and thus continues a cycle of obsessive thinking in order to preserve the image of Guadeloupe.

Her mood changes significantly when the family begins to promise that she will return to Routiers: “Il faut qu’on lui donne à tenir l’espérance d’un retour prochain pour qu’elle se lève enfin de sa mélancolie” (Pineau 125). In contrast with the other two novels that follow in this project, Man Ya’s traumatic experience of exile finds a relatively positive end. Because she had not adapted herself to the French way of life, she does not feel any sense of having lost part of herself when she finally leaves. Through her return to Guadeloupe, she finds resolution to her

exile. In comparison with the catatonic Man Ya from her final days in France, the narrator describes her upon the family's visit to her cabin after her and their respective returns to Guadeloupe: "Personne ne l'avait avertie. Alors, quand elle nous vit, Julia se mit à danser, chanter et crier au milieu le chemin qui va, étroit, devant sa case" (Pineau 214). In reference to this scene, Beverley Ormerod eloquently notes:

When she finally escapes from France, she resumes her rural existence in Guadeloupe as the natural location of her being, without trouble or self-questioning. This is her permanent place, the small house open to nature on all four sides, with the familiar sounds and smells of the hills and Guadeloupe all around. Thus there is no element of self-discovery in Julia's Parisian experience: but there is self-disclosure, a constant, unselfconscious revealing of self, which is to become the culturally determining factor in the life of her granddaughter Gisèle. (215)

However, considering the pervasive damage of her melancholic response to race, Pineau and in turn Ormerod appear to oversimplify Man Ya's return to Guadeloupe. Between her return home and the narrator's family's move to Martinique, the reader only remains connected to Man Ya through the narrator's letters to her; Pineau includes no descriptions of her life and of the difficulties that she surely would endure considering the pain that her experience there has caused. Sam Haigh has noted the melancholic side of this return as an enactment of the repetition compulsion. As Haigh points out:

...the compulsion to repeat past experiences, however painful, because they are familiar prevents these experiences from being fully understood and worked through. Julia, in her desperation to return home to her husband, is potentially trapped in just such a compulsion to repeat. However, when she does return to Guadeloupe, we are told that she does not allow Asdrubal to resume abusing her. (246-247)

Haigh interprets the statement that Asdrubal no longer beats Man Ya as being truth; in contrast, this fact could be the result of repression that allows the repetition compulsion to continue. After a significant absence, Pineau portrays Man Ya as happily dancing in her garden. As I will further

discuss in reference to the narrator, this type of oversimplification represents the narrator's effort to maintain the idealized version of the Antilles.

III. Man Ya's "Letters" to God

Through her portrayal of Man Ya, Pineau transforms the epistolary narrative into a much more inclusive category and asks the question: what constitutes a letter? For Pineau's narrator as for other French-educated Antilleans, a letter is a written document that possesses certain stylistic characteristics that indicate education and politeness. By contrast, while the illiterate Man Ya knows what a letter is from Asdrubal's love letters, she had no concept then of how to write a response to the letters she received. While in Guadeloupe both before and after her exile in France, whenever she receives a letter, she must have one of her neighbors read it to her. Through this process, Man Ya renders a wholly written form into an oral one; Pineau thus shifts the epistolary narrative from its European origins to a form that can also be suited to the needs of oral tradition and Antillean literature.

Pineau is not alone in this shift. Various modern Francophone and African-American implementations of the missive revolutionize the epistolary form by incorporating oral culture into the highly stylized letter. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses one particularly important innovation that he terms a "speakerly" text in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. As Gates argues, this speakerly text represents the coming to voice of a previously voiceless character type: that of the African-American woman who speaks in an African-American vernacular. We can see this "speakerly text" at work in *L'Exil selon Julia* through Man Ya's frequent prayers to God. Internal monologues that address God directly, her spoken letters decry her hopelessness in exile and the abuse that she suffered in Guadeloupe.

Like the narrator's written letters that I will discuss later in the chapter, these oral missives constitute Man Ya's testimony to her traumatic exile.

Before delving into specific prayers, we must first examine Man Ya's choice of confidant: God. Throughout the novel, the narrator depicts her grandmother as a pious woman. Even before the family takes her to France, Man Ya frequently communicates with God. The narrator describes Man Ya's weekly trips to mass in Guadeloupe:

Comme chaque dimanche, Man Ya se lève avant le soleil, les nuages, les coqs et tous les animaux de la Création...Man Ya va à pied, quelque cinq kilomètres, priant tout le long du chemin pour le repos de l'âme de sa manman, pour ses enfants, ses amis, ses adversaires et le triste sire qui a rétabli l'esclavage, juste pour elle...Elle descend au bourg pour rejoindre le Seigneur et prier l'Agneau qui a racheté le péché du monde. (Pineau 35)

A woman who suffers in a miserable marriage of domestic slavery, Man Ya quietly makes her wishes known to God. The reader is not privy to the specifics of her prayers other than the list of people for whom she prays. As a marginalized black woman, she has been left few choices outside of silence. Like her enslaved ancestors before her, Man Ya turns to prayer as an outlet for self-expression.

When Pineau begins Man Ya's prayers, they are a lament about her exile in France; seeking a reason for her forced migration, she asks God for answers. As a speaker of Créole, she is isolated from everyone except her son and daughter-in-law, who despite being able to speak the language, use only French in the house. Man Ya's linguistic isolation becomes her first traumatic experience of exile; while she has endured abuse throughout most of her life, the loss of her home in Guadeloupe constitutes an even more powerful blow to her psyche. Without anyone else to talk to in exile, she turns to God.

In the letter novels that I examine in this project, the writing protagonist chooses an ideal reader/correspondent to whom to write. This ideal correspondent, while not responding to the letter writer, does “listen” to the story being told. Altman highlights the confidant’s passive role:

At what we might call the ‘degré zero de la confiance,’ the confidant fulfills his minimal, passive, twofold function: he listens to confessions, he listens to stories. Often at the beginning of both play and letter narrative he has the vital function of triggering the exposition. What he hears is an account of past events; this narrative-connected role, obviously unsustainable in the dramatic medium, continues throughout the text to be part of the epistolary confidant’s *raison d’être*. Absent by definition, he cannot witness the events to which the dramatic confidant is most often a third party; they must be told to him... (51)

Absence becomes even more complicated in the sort of one-sided exchange that Pineau creates in *L’Exil selon Julia*. Without any response, the letter writer assumes certain answers on the part of her confidant that allow her to continue writing. More important than whether or not the letter’s author receives a response from her ideal confidant is the self-reflexive nature of the one-sided letters. In a sense, a diary-like series of missives evolves into an exchange with the self. The confidant’s absence provides time and isolation for self-reflection, as Dena Goodman notes: “Because it [letter writing] allows a person to withdraw into him or herself, writing also facilitates the reflection through which personal autonomy is attained, or at least experienced. It is one of the learned skills that allow individuals to determine and follow their own will, to live and act according to their own values...” (2). Following this formulation, subjectivity is cultivated through this reflexivity; Goodman emphasizes the agency that eighteenth century French women letter writers were able to gain through letter writing. In an epistolary context, the letter writer begins the process of listening to themselves through composition.

Despite the fact that Pineau does not mention Alice Walker in her list of African-American influences, *The Color Purple*, Walker’s diasporic adaptation of the epistolary form

clearly resonates with Pineau's portrayal of Man Ya.¹⁹ Thus, considering that critics have devoted little attention to Pineau's epistolarity, I want to consider the extensive number of critical texts that discuss Walker's epistolarity. Through Walker's use of the letter form, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that she: "...represents Celie's growth of self-consciousness as an act of writing...Celie, in her letters, writes herself into being" (*Monkey* 243). In "Letters, Diaspora, and Home in *The Color Purple*," Tokizane Sanae addresses difficulties that certain people may have about Celie's ability to compose the letters in Walker's novel considering her education level and the language she uses:

But to be realistic, it is rather unlikely in the beginning of the story that this amount of writing has actually occurred, taking into account her [Celie's] poor writing skills and her restricted time for writing. It may be more reasonable to assume that the text is a record of internal monologues; taken up against the prohibition of speech, Celie's way of expressing herself may have become very private and introverted. (278)

Fourteen-year-old Celie also addresses her letters to God after her stepfather sexually abuses her and tells her that she had better not tell anyone about what happened except God. Searching for an outlet for her trauma, Celie does exactly as her abuser tells her. In both Walker and Pineau's narratives, the female characters have experienced significant abuse at the hands of both men and society. Celie and Man Ya recreate themselves through their internal acts of writing/speaking.

In the section of the novel entitled "Les cinq ministères de Man Ya," Pineau introduces the prayers during passages starting with "Elle dit"; this narrative strategy establishes distance

¹⁹ *The Color Purple*'s protagonist, Celie, begins writing letters to God as a fourteen year-old girl. Celie is poor and uneducated and lives in rural Georgia. She is pregnant at the novel's beginning with a child that was conceived because she was raped by her stepfather. Her stepfather takes the baby and threatens Celie's life if she tells anyone other than God. She starts by writing letters to God to understand what has happened to her. After her mother dies and her stepfather marries a new wife, he sends Celie off to marry a man named Mr. _____. Celie's marriage separates her from her sister, Nellie, the only person who loves her. After Celie leaves, she starts writing to Nellie rather than writing to God. Celie has an abusive marriage to Mr. _____, and Nellie becomes her only confidant. However, Celie becomes disheartened because Nellie never responds to her letters and starts writing to no one at all. Eventually, Celie finds letters that Nellie had been writing her for years hidden in Mr. _____'s trunk. In contrast with Celie's African American vernacular in her letters, Nellie writes in standard English that she has learned as a missionary.

between the narrator's voice and that of Man Ya; such a marker is necessary because there are only minor shifts in style between the two narrative voices. In Man Ya's first inner monologue with God, she relates her feelings of alienation: "Elle dit: Mon Dieu, la froidure entre dans la chair et perce jusqu'aux os. Tous ces Blancs-là comprennent pas mon parler. Et cette façon qu'ils ont à me regarder comme si j'étais une créature sortie de la côte de Lucifer. Faut voir ça pour le croire. À mon retour en Guadeloupe, je raconterai à Léa que Là-Bas, la France, c'est un pays de désolation" (Pineau 55). In contrast with the passage where she refers to herself as "la plus laide négresse noire," Man Ya mocks the French response to her skin color and France's cold weather and desolation. If she made these sorts of remarks to her son, he would most certainly rebuke her and insist that she should be happy to be living in such a civilized country. However, in her response-less prayers, she finds the opportunity to make such a complaint. Moreover, not knowing whether she will ever return to her homeland, she imagines that she will go back and goes as far as to make plans about things to tell her friend Léa. In these early prayers, she maintains this hopeful tone and never doubts that one day she will make the voyage home.

In the same prayer, she continues her pleas and tries to explain to God that she never wanted to leave: "Mais pourquoi on m'a pas laissée en Guadeloupe? Non, je n'ai rien demandé. Par des fois, il se trouve des personnes qui chavirent le destin. Mais, mon Dieu, Tu es témoin, j'ai jamais voulu délaisser Monsieur Astrubal" (Pineau 55). A devout woman who believes that she has sinned by leaving her husband behind, Man Ya attempts to make her apologies to God while looking to him for an answer to her questions about why she has been sent into exile; finding no immediate answers, she sets about finding her own purpose. Having survived Asdrubal's abuse, Man Ya decides that she must take the same stance about establishing her worth in exile through her ability to work. This new sense of purpose inspires Man Ya to move

past her initial sorrows. In fact, she does not appear to be suffering from any form of homesickness or mourning in the prayer in which she proclaims her rejuvenation:

Elle dit: 'Bondieu, tu m'as donné deux mains pour te glorifier. Je crains pas le travail. J'ai pas peur d'user mon corps, non. Tu m'as conduite ici. J'ai vu que ce pays donne du soleil aussi. Eh ben, je fais comme si j'étais là-bas, à Routhiers. Pleurer c'est pas une solution. Je suis en santé, merci, Seigneur. Je Te demande seulement de prendre Asdrubal sous Ta protection, de pas laisser Satan déposer des entraves sur sa route. Ici, y a ni vanille, ni pied-café, ni pied-cacao. Mais, je désespère pas. La terre est là quand même, pareille. Et y a ces enfants-là à éduquer pour Daisy et Maréchal. (Pineau 67-68)

Seeing that the children are not receiving the necessary education from their assimilated parents, she endeavors to educate them about the Antilles and Antillean history. In the chapter entitled "Éducation," she teaches them a work ethic and pragmatism while also secretly recounting stories that her own grandmother had told about slavery. These stories take particular hold on the narrator and profoundly affect her world view. Understanding her importance in the lives of the children, Man Ya's self-concept receives a boost after years of abuse. However, her self remains inextricably tied to life in Guadeloupe; in her interactions with the children, Man Ya revives her homeland through her memories. This prayer reveals that she is beginning to suffer some difficulties in France. Emphasizing that she cannot find certain necessary ingredients, Man Ya alludes to the bounty of her garden and feels the loss of that expressive space. She concludes on a positive note, but she cannot continue to repress her sadness as time goes on. Without the stabilizing roots that her garden has provided, she struggles to find a replacement object that gives her life the same meaning.

This rootlessness is endemic to diasporas. In the previously cited article, Tokizane Sanae's argument focuses on the diasporic aspects of *The Color Purple* and traces Celie's development from addressless subject to addressed subject in her epistolary process. Describing the diaspora from a letter-based conceptualization, Sanae states:

From the epistolary perspective, the diaspora can be compared to the addressless, drifting letter, and the diasporic situation can be described as the impossibility of writing home. The diasporic movement is distinguished from other migratory forms by its total loss, relating to 'forced movement, exile and a consequent sense of loss derived from an inability to return' (Kaira, Kaur and Hutnyk 2005, 10). It also implies a sense of disability or impotence...diasporic deprivation of power is characterized by the loss not only of the address but also of the addressee, in other words the impossibility of writing/sending letters home. The loss of home in diaspora causes a constant longing for home or the establishment of a new home. As for the epistolary communication, there is a wish rather to *be* a home, an address, where one would find oneself in the position of receiving letters. (276-277)

While Sanae is delineating Celie's African American experience of diaspora, these comments also apply to both Man Ya and the narrator's troubles in exile. As diasporic subjects, this results in their need to find an outlet of expression. Like the addressless Celie, Man Ya is adrift in her diasporic condition. Whereas she had a fixed address and a sense of home while in Guadeloupe, her displacement in France causes her to feel detached from her identity and her new "home" in the Parisian *cit  *. In the context of *L'Exil selon Julia*, Sanae's characterization of diaspora has clear parallels with my concept of traumatic exile. There are two key words in the Sanae passage that establish this connection: "loss" (which the passage repeats four times) and "longing." Similar psychological manifestations of the diasporic situation appear in Freud's melancholia. This loss of address/home mirrors the loss of Freud's love object in its effects on the self-concept of the exiled person. Also, extending this discussion to include Oliver's melancholic racism, the loss of address that occurs in the diasporic condition mimics the loss of the beloved self. Because "home" is generally a place of confirmation and self-development, the loss of this place diminishes the possibility of subjectivity for Man Ya and produces nostalgia.

As Man Ya continues to be separated from her homeland, she vacillates between idealization of her former life and a frank examination of her suffering. Like Celie's discussion of her rape, Man Ya's prayers become an outlet for her to reconsider Asdrubal's violent behavior

and a space through which to re-envision herself. In one of her longest prayers, she does not plead with God to return her to Asdrubal or to forgive her for having left him. Instead, she recalls his most painful actions against her:

Elle dit: 'Quand le cyclone 28 est passé sur la Guadeloupe, il était loin. Asdrubal, en France, je ne sais. Il demandait pardon pour tous les coups. Il envoyait des cartes en forme de cœurs parsemés d'un sable pailleté d'or, des lettres parfumées à la rose sur lesquelles il avait tamponné des bouquets de fleurs et des figures de Blancs se donnant des baisers. Des lettres! D'amour, s'il vous plaît! Un enfant du voisinage lisait les belles phrases... 'Chérie de ma vie. Mon cœur palpite pour toi seule, mon adorée. Mes baisers s'envolent vers tes lèvres sucrées. L'amour est un feu qui ne s'éteindra jamais entre nous...' Asdrubal, je me figurais que les colonies avaient arrangé tes sentiments. Sotte, j'ai cru que tu avais appris à vivre à cause de l'uniforme français. Je t'ai attendu, monsieur Asdrubal. J'ai même essayé d'apprendre l'alphabet, pour lire moi-même tes mots d'amour et jouir toute seule de l'odeur du papier. Hélas, quand tu es revenu, tu étais le même Bourreau que le Seigneur m'avait donné pour ma vie sur la terre. J'ai pas couru sous les coups. Mais j'ai plus cherché à comprendre les écritures. J'ai plus caressé les lettres de France. J'ai plus rêvé de cœurs ni d'amour. J'ai attendu que ta bouche me dise pourquoi tu me rossais comme ça, pourquoi tu me considérais pas mieux que si j'étais une esclave que t'avais payée comptant, pourquoi tu aimais me salir et me fouetter avant de me renverser sans un mot. Non, je n'ai plus jamais caressé tes belles lettres, Asdrubal. Je les ai jetées au feu, je les ai enterrées au bas d'un pied de muscade. Juste pour voir si elles pourraient donner des choses vivantes et belles, des fruits, ou bien des fleurs monstrueuses jamais vues en ce monde. (Pineau 97-98)

As previously discussed, Asdrubal's love letters had a profound effect on the young Man Ya's self-concept. However, as she learned that the sentiments that Asdrubal wrote were false, the carefully constructed version of herself that she had created through his letters imploded. Having been separated from him for an extended period, the pain that she repressed in order to survive comes through in this prayer. While Asdrubal's written letters became destructive, the letters that Man Ya speaks to God in this section have the opposite effect. Through speaking about herself to God, Man Ya is also performing a self-reflexive act and as such develops strength enough to speak out against Asdrubal. In a rare act of revolt, Man Ya destroys her husband's letters at the end of this passage by burning them and burying them in the earth. Man Ya's actions indicate an intent to gain control over the letters through their destruction; as an expert gardener, she has

used her abilities as another form of self-expression during her years of silence and whippings. Having gained this small amount of agency, she wonders what the outcome of her rebellion will be: beauty or monstrosity. Thus far, her life has mostly provided the latter, but at the time, she maintained hope.

This hope does not endure. Ten pages later, Man Ya's ability to speak frankly about Asdrubal diminishes:

Elle dit: "Monsieur Asdrubal c'était un genre fanfaron. Il m'a jamais parlé comme à une personne. Toujours comme à son esclave. Tout ce qu'il me disait, je faisais. J'ai jamais dit non. Quand il parlait à d'autres, ça sonnait tocotoc, bel français. Quand il était las de me voir, il criait: 'Marche!' Asdrubal, il était fort dans les écritures, mais il mettait aussi ses mains en terre. L'encre tachait ses doigts, comme le lait de la banane. Même si je l'appelais Bourreau derrière son dos, je l'ai toujours respecté. Il m'a donné son nom et trois garçons. Peut-être, quand il me regardait avec mes cheveux grénés, mon nez large, il sentait qu'il m'aurait tuée tellement j'étais pas à son goût. Nègresse noire à gros pieds. C'est peut-être pour ça qu'il me foutait à grands coups." (Pineau 106)

The criticisms at the beginning of the prayer quickly give way to a re-idealized version of Asdrubal, man of culture and of nature. Whereas Man Ya's revolt against his lies and letters gave the illusion of agency, her re-acceptance of her lot in life indicates that Man Ya may not be capable of full self-realization after a lifetime of self-hatred. In contrast with the prayer in which Man Ya proclaims that she is willing to work and has a purpose, this final prayer seems to negate any of the positive self-claims that she made earlier. For Man Ya, while her letters/prayers to God function as a space in which she is able to speak despite her marginalization, they do not engender a lasting shift in the self-image that Man Ya has constructed. In comparison with Walker's Celie, Man Ya does not experience the letter form as an awakening of her voice; rather, it provides a brief respite in which she finds some form of voice, but her character does not come to any profound understanding of herself or her situation. It serves as a space of lament about her departure, but Pineau conspicuously limits the self-understanding that she gains in these inner

monologues. Preserving a realistic view of Man Ya, Pineau detaches Man Ya's personal growth from her experiences in France with a purpose. The author does not want to portray exile from the homeland as a catalyst for self-affirmation. For Man Ya, exile is as destructive an experience as physical abuse. Through the use of Man Ya's spoken letters, Pineau highlights the plight of the Antillean woman and engages with orality. The prayers do not resolve Man Ya's exile or the racial trauma that she had experienced; rather, they serve as a launching point for the narrator's more traditional use of the epistolary form later in the novel.

IV. The Narrator's Epistolary Text

Unlike Man Ya, the narrator does not have the ability to return home to Guadeloupe and end her traumatizing exile. The narrator is in crisis because she does not know where her home truly is. Throughout her experiences in French schools, she discovers that the cultural assimilation that her parents have attempted will never be enough to make her an accepted citizen of the *métropole*. From the novel's first lines, Pineau emphasizes the narrator's difference:

Négro
Négresse à plateau
Blanche-Neige
Bamboula
Charbon
et compagnie...(11)

The young girl professes to being haunted by the meaning of these insults from her classmates. These formative traumas provoke her desire to seek education and personal worth elsewhere; luckily for the narrator, Man Ya is able and willing to help in her quest. However, as Man Ya leaves to return to Guadeloupe and finds salvation in her return home, the narrator remains in France. Through Madame Baron's abuse, she sustains an even more damaging blow to her psyche. As a result of this abuse, the narrator, like Man Ya, must find an outlet for her laments

and proceeds to write letters to Man Ya. Man Ya addressed her prayers to God out of utmost religious trust, and the narrator writes letters to her grandmother out of a similar trust. Because she feels that Man Ya is the only person who will understand her troubles, she writes to her, creating the ideal passive confidant.

The narrator's ambivalent relationship with race begins at an early age. Many of her difficulties stem from the ambiguous relationship that her parents have with their homeland. In contrast with Man Ya who defies assimilation, her son and the narrator's father, Maréchal works for his entire life to be accepted by the French; Pineau emphasizes the excellence of his French and his dignified manner in his army uniform. In addition to these two stellar attributes, Pineau also underscores that he is dark-skinned like his mother. As he courts the narrator's mother, the color of his skin could have posed a problem for the much lighter-skinned Daisy, but: "...il parle si bien, si bien le français. Il a des diplômes, des certificats. Il est sergent de l'armée française" (Pineau 27). Through his hard work and despite his skin color, Maréchal is successful; he rejects the realities of the society that his mother grew up in, and instead of viewing himself as inferior to the light-skinned Daisy, he is able to stand on equal footing with her. As Frantz Fanon notes: "Historiquement, il faut comprendre que le Noir veut parler le français, car c'est la clef susceptible d'ouvrir les portes qui, il y a cinquante ans encore, lui étaient interdites" (*Peau noire* 30). Thus, Maréchal's choices are a reaction to the opportunities that had been denied his dark-skinned mother. Just as Man Ya attempts to prove her worthiness by her piety, Maréchal endeavors to assert his worthiness through the French language and a career in the army. Mirroring his father, Maréchal creates possibilities for himself that his father had experienced because of the lighter color of his skin. At certain points, it seems as if Maréchal is exacting vengeance for his father's sense of superiority by succeeding in the same career.

However, his devotion to the French language and society is the source of his prejudice against his homeland. In one of the most striking lines of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon also notes the effects that learning French has on the postcolonial psyche: “Parler une langue, c’est assumer un monde, une culture” (33). As Maréchal learns to speak French, he would also inevitably absorb the sorts of attitudes expressed in the list of insults at the novel’s beginning. In the same article where he discusses Man Ya’s racial melancholia, Sam Haigh also discusses that of Maréchal and notes a particular scene after De Gaulle’s removal from the presidency. Maréchal stays in his pajamas and does not go to work because of his depression. Haigh asserts: “This is the other side of the raced subject’s racial melancholia. Maréchal’s ‘euphoric’ relationship with France [belief in Guadeloupe’s greatness and also in De Gaulle as its savior] is suddenly transformed into ‘ambulatory despair’...” (243). For Maréchal, unlike for Man Ya, France and De Gaulle are the lost love objects; having spent most of his adult life abroad, he no longer feels the intense connection to the island that his mother does. Maréchal’s assimilation results in his racial melancholia, and his daughter’s later experiences mirror his troubled relationship with race. Internalizing how her father feels about his background, she does not initially identify with her Antillean heritage.

At first, her parents’ views of their former home make the narrator feel grateful to be living in France. Because her parents have devoted themselves to escaping Antillean life and are enthusiastic proponents of French civilization, the narrator’s early impressions of the islands reveal her parents’ prejudices. Her parents and their Antillean friends proclaim:

...Enfants! Rien, il n’y a rien de bon pour vous au Pays, disaient les grandes personnes. Antan, ce fut une terre d’esclavage qui ne porte plus rien de bon. Ne demandez pas après ce temps passé! Profitez de la France! Profitez de votre chance de grandir ici-là! Au Pays, la marmaille parle patois. Profitez pour apprendre le français de France...Combien de Nègres vous envie, vous n’en avez pas idée. Y a tant de jalousie...C’est pas facile d’échapper à Misère, Malédiction et Sorcellerie, ces trois engeances du Mal qui

gouvernent là-bas. Les Nègres suent dans les champs de cannes et ne voient jamais un seul soleil se lever sur leur vie. Les enfants s'en vont à l'école sans souliers. On connaît ni linge à la mode ni bonbons réglisse... Mais quant à déterrer ces histoires d'esclavage, ça vaut pas la peine. Et laissez les Blancs raconter leurs affaires! Ne vous occupez pas! Mesurez votre chance... Non, y a rien de bien bon au Pays (Pineau 28-29).

Grateful to be able to provide their children with opportunities that they never had, the parents denigrate the homeland in order to emphasize the superiority of France. The negative connotations of certain words ("Nègre," "marmaille") mirror the slurs at the novel's beginning. The narrator's parents mimic the racist insults of the white children and also the damaging statements made by Man Ya's mother. Despite having access to more opportunities than Man Ya, the narrator's parents perpetuate a similar sense of inferiority as the older woman had in her relationship with Asdrubal. Like the insults, these depictions of Antilleans have a traumatizing effect on the narrator that changes as she hears about Antillean history from Man Ya.

Complicating these condemnations is the narrator's description of her parents' reactions after such a speech. The awful experiences that the parents described in Guadeloupe shift to nostalgia:

Ils en énuméraient les laideurs comme pour se rassurer, nous convaincre aussi. Mais parfois, songeant à l'île, des reflets merveilleux scintillaient dans leurs yeux. Tous les atours de France: beauté, liberté, facilité, chemins de réussite, ne dessouchaient pas l'amour de leur Guadeloupe. Sans le vouloir vraiment, ils laissaient pendre une corde lâche, entre eux et le pays natal. Palanque sur laquelle on décrochait les appâts d'une nostalgie, les histoires sorcières, l'aubaine d'une-deux poses et gammes, la manne du parler créole, les nouvelles chiches, les colis de Man Bouboule: vanille, muscade, rhum, et cannelle. (Pineau 29)

Maréchal has spent his adult life attempting to distance himself from Guadeloupe and from prejudice about the color of his skin; his wife, Daisy, was initially attracted to him because of his uniform and the fact that his post in the army would take her to far away places. However, they cannot escape their attachment to the land, its language, and its food. Like Man Ya, the narrator's parents seem to be most homesick when discussing the food that reminds them of Guadeloupe. It is striking that the narrator's parents do not experience homesickness in the same way as Man Ya

despite depicting Guadeloupe's positive and negative aspects. While the ambivalent relationship of love and hate would normally indicate a melancholic response, it does not in this case because Maréchal and Daisy's melancholia takes on the racial element described by Oliver. Rather than holding Guadeloupe as the lost love object, their internalization of the oppressor's view of them as inferior and abject provokes their crisis. Desperately wanting to be French but not being able to be, the narrator's parents are unable to fully realize their homesickness. However, the parents' nostalgia has a profound effect on the narrator's later understanding of Guadeloupe; while as a young child she accepts these views without question, she embraces and investigates the contrasting images in her attempt to find a home in the African diaspora. The narrator's parents project their identity troubles on to their child. Anne Anlin Cheng discusses the transference of this conflict and the negative effects of the object relations that causes the collapse of the subject into the object: "Melancholia can be quite contagious. After all, it designates a condition of identity disorder where subject and object become indistinguishable from one another. The melancholic object, made neither dead nor fully alive, must experience its own subjectivity as suspension, as excess and denigration – and in this way, replicate the melancholic subject" (51). As the narrator later develops her own voice in her letters, she seeks to once again become a subject by writing.

After seeing her parents' conflicted views, the narrator has difficulty forming a coherent sense of self. Any self-understanding that she has cultivated as a young child is soon under assault when she begins school. Her academic life amongst the white teachers and students becomes as destructive to her identity as Asdrubal's abuse is for Man Ya. The first in the series of many abuses occurs on her first day of kindergarten. Noting that she is the only non-white child in the class, the narrator describes her isolation from her classmates. She begins her

academic career desperate to learn how to read after having observed her mother enraptured by books. This inclination towards learning however soon becomes problematic for the narrator; as she excels at her writing exercises, she becomes the target of the teacher's criticism. When the narrator proudly finishes a handwriting assignment before her classmates, the teacher exclaims: " 'Les enfants! La Noire a déjà fini sa copie! Alors, vous pouvez le faire aussi!' " (Pineau 60).

The narrator has never been so openly reminded of her own difference. The teacher further insults the child when she discovers that the narrator is writing with her left hand. The teacher barks out orders: " 'D'abord, on n'est pas chez les Arabes ici!' tempête l'institutrice. On n'écrit pas de droite à gauche! Secundo! cette main-là, cette patte gauche, n'est pas la main de l'écriture! " (Pineau 61). In this passage, the teacher emphasizes the narrator's status as Other by connecting her with another disdained culture (that of the Arabs) and with another species (the allusion to her "patte"). Through the tone of these comparisons, the narrator understands that she is being insulted and singled out amongst her classmates. Until this point in her life, the narrator has mostly interacted with people who are like her: her family and the other military families from the colonies. Without realizing that she is Other in the eyes of the surrounding *Français de souche*, the narrator expects to be treated like everyone else. However, through this interaction, she begins to understand that her skin color causes her teacher's reaction: "Le lendemain, Manman parle à la maîtresse qui sourit et acquiesce et puis ne me considère plus jusqu'à la fin de l'année. Je deviens la Noire invisible. Tant pis, j'apprends quand même à lire et à écrire de gauche à droite en faisant des comédies de pleins et de déliés. Tant pis si son regard passe sur moi sans me voir, si les enfants me tiennent à l'écart" (Pineau 62). As a small child, the narrator does not realize the implications of such reactions, but her mother clearly realizes the gravity of the situation and speaks to the teacher. However, the teacher responds to the narrator's mother's

expectations of equal treatment with passive-aggressive racism. Most striking is the narrator's reactions to her teacher's behavior. Rather than descending into self-conscious depression, the narrator defiantly states that she learned to read and write despite the teacher's lack of attention. With the power of the written word, she proceeds into her own world of learning in which great works of the French literary canon are her teachers. On the same page, as if to highlight her growth in spite of French racism, she recounts the books that she has read at a very young age:

Je sais lire et je lis tout ce que je rencontre. Papa achète tous les livres des représentants: trente et quelques volumes de l'Encyclopédie, dix collections reliées, des piles d'œuvres complètes et des romans brochés. Les livres et tous les personnages qui les habitent me parlent, me laissent entrer dans leurs conversations. À sept ans, je lis des pages de *La Princesse de Clèves*, des *Fleurs du Mal*, des *Liaisons dangereuses*, des *Histoires extraordinaires* d'Edgar Allan Poe, des *Lettres de mon moulin*... (Pineau 62)

Just as Man Ya's prayers reflect both a religious and epistolary background, the narrator's choice of novels is particularly telling. It includes one traditional narrative where letters play a significant role in the plot (*La Princesse de Clèves*) and also the most heralded epistolary novel in French literature (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*). The narrator's absorption of these texts and others will appear in the letters that she later writes to Man Ya; however, it is her desire to read that is of most concern at this point of the novel. Driven to educate herself out of invisibility, the narrator engages with and rejects the teacher's derisive gaze.

Briefly returning to Kelly Oliver's discussion of witnessing and recognition that I introduced earlier, we find that the gaze affects recognition and domination in contemporary Western thought. Oliver notes: "To be empowered is to be visible; to be disempowered is to be rendered invisible. To be recognized is to be visible; to be misrecognized or not recognized is to be rendered invisible. Dominance and marginality are discussed in terms of visibility or invisibility" (Oliver 11). In her discussion, Oliver emphasizes that this manner of thinking excludes other perceptual systems that are equally important as vision in understanding our

environment. She specifically engages with the circulation of various energies (thermal, chemical, electrical, and social energies) as working with vision to create a more dynamic system of perception in which all of the systems “allow[s] for an openness and connection to otherness and difference not possible in neo-Hegelian struggles for recognition” (Oliver 14-15). For Pineau’s narrator, she does not continue to seek the teacher’s approving gaze and rejects the notion that she merits invisibility. By rejecting these ideas, she falls in line with Oliver’s assertion that the gaze of the oppressor is not necessary for recognition in postcolonial subjectivity. As the narrator begins to find an outlet for her frustrations in the written word, she sows the seeds for an eventual act of witnessing that will provide support in a time of desperate need when another teacher abuses her.

Contributing to the pain of the teacher’s abuse is the mistreatment that she also receives at the hands of her classmates. Just as the narrator is invisible to her teacher, so she is invisible to her classmates. She later states that even as she forms tentative friendships, the instant that there is a small disagreement, the white classmates would resort to racial slurs. This rejection by her classmates also provokes the narrator to consider her origins. When French students assault the narrator with cries of “Retournez dans votre pays, Bamboulas! Retournez! chez vous en Afrique!,” she finds herself questioning where this homeland she should return to is (Pineau 139-140). Despite having lived in Africa, she states: “Je me souviens peu des jours passés sur cette terre-là” (Pineau 19). If she does not remember the time that her family spent in Africa while she was a small child, she was not truly affected by her experiences there. One can assume that she lived in French military housing, so her experience of Africa would have been similar to her experience with the other military families in the *cité* in France. In the narrator’s discussion of “Africa,” the continent serves as a monolith in her mind, and because of her extremely limited

knowledge of the space, the narrator is not capable of discussing the specific aspects of where she lived. Feeling increasingly exiled in the only country she has ever known, the young girl feels a great deal of confusion. While her classmates tell her to return to Africa, she realizes that this is not possible. Unable to find a home in France or in Africa, the young narrator must continue to search for her home.

When Man Ya arrives in France, she provides the narrator with ideas about another possible homeland. Having been rejected by France and knowing nothing about Africa, the narrator finds herself drawn to Man Ya's stories of Guadeloupe, an island where she would not be the racial Other. At first, the narrator does not comprehend the troubled history between France and the Antilles. While her parents and the French schools are silent about Antillean history, the narrator begins learning about her background at the "school of Man Ya." For instance, the narrator describes the stories of slavery that Man Ya tells the children in secret:

Et lorsqu'elle nous chuchote les histoires d'esclavage que lui contait sa manman, des frissons se lèvent sur son âme. Pour nous seuls, des Nègres sortent de l'antan où ils marchaient avec des fers aux pieds. Des vies désolées remontent les ravines d'oubli... Les longueurs de mer traversées. Le fouet. La misère des champs de canne. Le poison. Les langues avalées. Le fouet. Le tambour qui bat comme un cœur dans la nuit. La désespérance. Les chaînes. La peur. La ruse. Le fouet... (Pineau 84)

The narrator's only exposure to this sort of information comes during these covert meetings with Man Ya. Because of Maréchal and Daisy's insistence on ignoring the slave past, they have worked to become assimilated and speak impeccable French. In this passage, the narrator repeats "fouet" three times; in turn, the whip emerges as dominant image. However, this is not the only time this word occurs in the novel. In the sections where Man Ya discusses Asdrubal's abuse, she notes his use of a whip in the beatings and thus extends the slave metaphor. Because Man Ya has experienced this form of violence herself, she underscores the whip in a re-enactment of

repressed memories through the repetition compulsion. Unable to reconcile her own abuse, it infiltrates the stories that she tells the children.

The narrator reiterates the silence about Antillean history thirty pages later: “Seule, Man Ya ose nous instruire. Elle excelle en ce domaine. Quand elle dit le Mot, des rivages sans soleil s’ouvrent devant nos yeux. Frissons. L’esclavage!” (Pineau 111). Repeating *frissons* in this second quotation, the narrator reiterates her powerful response to learning about her ancestors; this knowledge comes with a certain price. In the use of “Mot” with the first letter capitalized, the narrator underscores that these stories had a religious aspect for her. In turn, the word of Man Ya becomes her personal gospel that guides the rest of her life. These stories of slavery haunt the narrator and contribute to her experience of racial trauma just as they have for Man Ya. Without any context for understanding such violence, the narrator internalizes the stories without having a way to work through them. As Man Ya witnesses to the unspeakable in her recounting, the narrator and her siblings experience what Dominick LaCapra calls empathic unsettlement. A concept that LaCapra created in an effort to understand people that listen to the testimonies of Holocaust victims, he describes: “The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness... involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (LaCapra 78). Although LaCapra also warns of the dangers of the listener absorbing the trauma as her own,²⁰ historical traumas on the level of the Holocaust or slavery would inevitably continue to have implications for the descendants of the sufferers. The memory of the past violence functions as a constant backdrop to Antillean authors, including Pineau. While Man Ya

²⁰ “Empathic unsettlement also raises in pointed form the problem of address of traumatic events involving victimization, including the problem of composing narratives that neither confuse one’s own voice or position with the victim’s nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure but allow the unsettlement that they address to affect the narrative’s own movement...” (LaCapra 78)

herself was not a slave, her grandmother was, and Man Ya had been told stories by her mother that she tells to the children. Experiencing a confused sense of empathic unsettlement herself, Man Ya has internalized these stories as part of her family history and through her mother's assertions about skin color, resulting in her loss of self and melancholia.

Empathic unsettlement has an immense impact on the narrator after she hears these stories. Adding to her confusion stemming from the racism that she encounters at school, she simultaneously idealizes and fears Guadeloupe. Understanding the family's slave history, she also by extension sees herself amongst the slaves: "L'idée de l'esclavage habita mes nuits. Je voyais la terre d'Afrique. Un village de la brousse. Retour de la chasse des hommes. Négresses à plateau pilant le mil. Marmaille coursant de singes et des gazelles. Un village si tranquille. Et puis les négriers" (Pineau 114). However, in this passage, her imaginary experience of slavery occurs in Africa, not Guadeloupe, the more recent site of her family's slave trauma. In displacing these experiences to Africa (a place that she has already decided is not her "home"), the narrator is able to proceed through empathic unsettlement without allowing the experience to tarnish her idealized Guadeloupe.

As the narrator states in her discussion of her early school troubles, she became a voracious reader in response to the mistreatment. In the beginning, French canonical works were enough to satiate her. However, as she grows older and encounters the power of Man Ya's tales, these Western-centered works are no longer adequate. As a reaction to her growing distaste with French society, the narrator decides that she will render Man Ya's oral history and stories into written form:

Je veux quitter cette terre-là qui me repousse. Alors, je deviens écrivaine d'après-midi, gribouilleuse de minuit, scribe du petit matin. Écrire pour s'inventer des existences. Porte-plume voyageur, encre magique, lettre sorcières qui ramènent chaque jour dans un pays rêve. 'Ici-là, tu es chez toi !' entends-tu murmurer. Baume au cœur. Écrire le fond

brûlé d'une casserole de crème-cacao, des souvenirs cerf-volant, des enfants qui dansent sous la pluie face à une savane bleue. (Pineau 141)

This passage maintains the narrator's breathless wonder at the thought of being in Guadeloupe and amongst the magic and power that Man Ya has described to the children. Unlike the times when Man Ya recounts slave stories, the narrator's stories would speak less of the traumatic past and more of a future in which she has finally found a home. Regardless of whether or not this home exists as she sees it in this flight of fancy, she will invent a Guadeloupe through her stories that does fit her idealization. This idealization extends to the kinds of works that she will be able to read once she finally goes to the island: "Je me disais: je vais trouver là-bas des livres qui racontent des vies d'hommes et de femmes noirs, des histoires d'amour, des récits d'aventure où tous les héros sont des Noirs. Des Petits Poucets, des Belles au bois dormant, des Chattes botté noir" (Pineau 168). This imaginary literary world which she creates is a reflection of herself rather than of reality: equal parts French and Antillean without any cultural conflict. The narrator expects that the same stories that she enjoyed as a child will be told with black heroes and heroines without considering that these fairy tales are the product of their context. She also fails to consider that there may be entirely different stories on the whole that have no connection to the European versions. This oversimplification represents an idealization of Guadeloupe that persists even as she moves there and experiences the island for the first time. In her article "Emancipating Narratives: The Diasporic Struggle Reframed in Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia*," Mary Jo Muratore argues: "Through the narrative enterprise, the heroine creates a space of belongingness from the threads and fragments of a cultural past bequeathed to her, yet frustratingly inaccessible. The narrator's tales redeems...the narrator's sense of self-esteem..." (13). Muratore's interpretation notes the positive aspects of the narrator's desire to become a writer and create a literary space that helps to alleviate her troubles with identity. However, the

young girl's idealistic and naïve understanding of Guadeloupe will later cause confusion for her.

In her idealized Guadeloupe, she becomes the savior of the island's written histories through her ability to codify them into written language:

Je lançais des promesses comme une plante grimpante avance ces attaches: voilà !
j'apporte mes bras pour construire avec vous ce pays ! Dites-moi l'histoire vraie, je
l'écrirai pour ceux qui viennent. Racontez-moi encore et encore la vie emmêlée des
vivants et des morts, je donnerai la vie aux mots et la mort aux vieilles peurs, Je me ferai
papier, encre et porte-plume pour entrer dans la Chair du Pays. (Pineau 168)

As a response to the pain caused by exile, the narrator seeks to become a part of the Antillean community through her ability to manipulate the written word. Being able to provide a service that gifted storytellers like Man Ya are unable to provide, she would assume a needed position and would not be rejected. However, the narrator's characterization is also an oversimplification, for as scribe, she would fill a very Western role by codifying the existing stories, presumably in standard French. This role represents a situation that is equally conflicted as that of Pineau; the Créolistes would likely reject the narrator as a storyteller because of her inability to recount her legends in Créole. The narrator naively believes that she will be a hero because she is young enough to not fully understand linguistic politics.

In each case of idealization, the narrator is combating the melancholia produced by French racism. As she has also internalized the abject version of her self that French society has inflicted upon her, the narrator constructs elaborate fantasies to repair the damage done to her ego. Unlike Man Ya, she is not yet a lost cause after years of crushing abuse. However, the narrator does struggle after being humiliated by her teacher, Madame Baron. The passages in which the narrator recounts her fantasies of authorship appear after her first true authorial experience – a one-sided exchange with Man Ya. Mirroring the self-reflective aspect of Man

Ya's Letters/prayers to God, the narrator writes to Man Ya in an effort to support a sense of agency in the face of increasing melancholia.

V. Narrator's Epistolary Narrative

Armed with the knowledge of her family's slave past and with her dreams of writing her own Antillean stories, the narrator sets about trying to comprehend her abject self. As the narrator experiences empathic unsettlement and having created an ideal Guadeloupe that stems from Man Ya's nostalgia, she better understands her grandmother's struggles. In the process, she also establishes a parallel between her own suffering and that of the older woman: "Alors, je comprends mieux la mélancolie de Man Ya, sa peur de mourir ici là, sur une terre muette où les arbres n'ont pas d'oreilles..." (Pineau 118). As incidents in the narrator's life create further alienation, she begins to grapple with her own pathological response to exile. Despite having never been to Guadeloupe, it has come to represent a lost love object that she has never truly known. As her early characterizations lack ambivalence, she fixates on an ideal. Thus, this fixation limits the narrator's ability to comprehend her exile; like Man Ya, she makes repeated trips to Guadeloupe in her mind as a symptom of her own form of melancholia.

As the narrator grows into being a teenager, her life becomes increasingly complicated. Having learned through experience and through stories that she is racially Other, she encounters more significant problems with her self-image as an adolescent. Considering Man Ya's epistolarity and the narrator's evolving sense of self in the face of exilic trauma, I will now discuss the more conventional epistolarity of her granddaughter and its role in her efforts to find a voice and resolve her difficulties. This effort to maintain a sense of self through Man Ya and her stories creates a void in the narrator when Man Ya returns to Guadeloupe. Because she has become dependent upon Man Ya as her locus of Antillean identity, the young woman feels once

against lost without the sense of “home” that Man Ya provided for her: “Man Ya est partie, mais son absence est une présence aussi tenace que la nostalgie qui nous l’a enlevée” (Pineau 139). Thus, wanting to reconnect to a feeling of security, the narrator begins to write letters to Man Ya despite knowing that her grandmother is illiterate. However, with Man Ya’s departure, the narrator has to contend with the loss of the person who had come to represent the island for her. In Man Ya’s absence, the narrator collapses her into the homeland, and thus, as the narrator writes letters to her, she is also writing letters to her ideal home. This citation highlights the effects of Man Ya’s departure, and Pineau puts a specific emphasis on the words “presence” and “absence” and in turn engages with one of epistolarity’s most pressing questions as the letter renders an absent reader present by a written connection. Thus, as the narrator misses Man Ya, she attempts to recreate her grandmother’s presence through letters. However, Man Ya does not become entirely present because she never sends a letter back to the narrator. As the narrator writes her one-sided letters, she is not only maintaining her connection to Man Ya, but she is also reflexively writing to herself.

This narrative choice is deliberate on Pineau’s part; just as Man Ya addressed her prayers/letters to a passive confidant (God), the narrator does so in an effort to deal with a life being spent in exile. While God is an abstraction rather than a real person like Man Ya, their functions are similar in the epistolary construct. Man Ya closely associates God with her church and thus her life in Guadeloupe; God becomes an extension of her home. Similarly, for the narrator, Man Ya represents a living manifestation of her ideal space. The narrator’s initial letters are nothing more than an account of the family’s life in France. As she recounts the events, she treats the letter as solely an informative vehicle and hopes that Man Ya will respond in kind. In the first letter, the narrator makes the following request: “Si tu pouvais demander à quelqu’un de

t'écrire les réponses, je serais contente" (Pineau 146). Wanting to preserve the intimacy of their relationship in France, the narrator hopes to hear back from Man Ya. The narrator receives no response and yet continues to write. In one letter, she notes several things that the family needs: "Nous n'avons plus de muscade ni de cannelle. Est-ce que tu peux en apporter à Man Bouboule ? Elle nous fera un colis." (Pineau 148). Several pages later, the narrator thanks Man Ya for the things that she sent: "Nous avons bien reçu la cannelle, la poudre à colombo et aussi la farine de manioc" (Pineau 150). In her own way, Man Ya responds to the narrator's request without having to write anything; she also helps to assuage the narrator's longing for connection and for the Antilles.

Several letters into the one-sided conversation, the narrator shifts from informing Man Ya of the family events to writing in unparalleled confidence. Contrasting with the previous informative tone, the narrator informs Man Ya about increasingly private details in more intimate descriptions. For example, the narrator writes: "Enfin, mes têtes poussent! Je commençais à désespérer" (Pineau 149). At the end of this letter, she writes: "Je ne sais même pas si je vais envoyer cette lettre" (Pineau 150). It appears that the act of writing matters more than a real exchange for the narrator; whether or not she sends the letter to Man Ya, the narrator has selected her grandmother as her correspondent and trusted confidant. It is the image of Man Ya that encourages the young woman to write.

The narrator mimics the tone of novels like *Lettres portugaises* by communicating the struggles of her life to an addressee, but unlike Guilleragues's novel, the narrator's addressee is a trusted confidant as in Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*. Because of this fundamental difference, the narrator's letters do not perpetuate her cycle of melancholia as the letters from Mariane to the *chevalier* do. For Mariane, epistolarity represents the obsessive pursuit of the lost love object,

and letter writing is inevitably self-destructive. While Pineau maintains a similarly intimate tone, her narrator uses the letter in an effort to recover from the melancholia provoked by racist mistreatment. Man Ya does represent a formative loss for the narrator, but her departure is not the loss that begins the narrator's struggle with melancholia. Just as Man Ya has internalized the abject version of herself as "la plus laide des négresses noires," the narrator has felt her ego degrade in the French educational system. However, because Man Ya begins helping the narrator recover from her awful encounters at school through stories celebrating her heritage, the narrator becomes dependent upon Man Ya to empower her degraded ego and must write to Man Ya to maintain a sense of herself.

As she continues, the narrator debates telling Man Ya about the problems that she is having at school. Because of the bizarre nature of these events, she is confused by them and her emotional response to them. Before she even recounts the events, she writes: "Et maintenant il y a quelque chose de terrible qui m'arrive. Je ne fais plus semblant de pleurer. Si tu pouvais prier pour moi afin de me sauver de cette situation. Je ne peux pas l'écrire sur du papier. C'est très très très grave. Et personne ne peut m'aider. À part la Vierge Marie, et tous les saints que tu connais mieux que moi, je ne sais pas à qui m'adresser (Pineau 150). However, the narrator eventually summons the courage to tell her grandmother about the abuse at school: "Je t'écris une lettre, mais tu ne la recevras jamais. Je sais que tu dois déjà combattre tous les revenants de grand-père Astrubal. Personne ne te lira cette lettre" (Pineau 151). Because Man Ya's role in the narrator's self-understanding appears to be the only positive experience she has, to state that she will no longer write to her grandmother shows the effects of a highly traumatic experience. At this point, it is easier to stop communicating and repress the memories of her abuse than to

continue the correspondence. Eventually, she changes her mind and is able to avoid an impossible descent into melancholia through the epistolary act.

While using the space of the letter as a sort of therapy for her trauma, she attempts to reclaim the trauma as her own and gain an understanding of it. In the same letter, the reader discovers that Madame Baron, the narrator's teacher, has been forcing the narrator to spend hours under her desk during the school day. Madame Baron's treatment of the narrator mirrors that of the first teacher in that the narrator once again comprehends her role as Other in the French school system. Now old enough to understand her teacher's intentions, the narrator retreats into herself and views her letters to Man Ya as her only outlet for communication.

Lacking coping mechanisms for the self-devaluation that the teacher's treatment engenders, the narrator writes and searches for another outlet through which to work through her suffering. The narrator retreats to literature as a space of reflection. However, her first literary experience is an almost spiteful effort at proving her worth by reading French canonical works. In this second experience, she discovers a text that provides some insight: Anne Frank's diary. She proclaims to Man Ya:

Je vais essayer d'écrire l'histoire de ma vie, comme Anne Franck. C'est Manman qui m'a offert le livre. Elle vivait en Hollande avec sa famille. Comme ils étaient juifs, pendant la guerre, ils sont restés cachés dans un réduit jusqu'à ce que les nazis de Hitler les trouvent et les arrêtent en 1944. Ils ont été conduits dans un camp de la mort. Son histoire m'a donné à réfléchir. Je crois qu'après les vacances, je supporterai un peu mieux d'aller sous le bureau. Je penserai à Anne Franck qui est restée serrée dans la noirceur pendant deux années de guerre et puis qui est morte sans pouvoir réaliser son rêve: devenir actrice à Hollywood. (Pineau 152)

For authors like Pineau and characters like her narrator, Anne Frank represents a young woman who emerged as a celebrated literary voice despite writing in isolation and under traumatic circumstances. Pineau is by no means the first author of color to include the plight of the Jewish

people in one of her texts. In his autobiographical writings, black English author Caryl Phillips explains his connection to the Jewish plight:

As a child, in what seemed to be a hostile Guadeloupe, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them. At that time, I was staunchly indignant about everything from the Holocaust to the Soviet persecution of Jewry. The bloody excesses of colonialism, the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage were not on the curriculum, and certainly not on the television screen. As a result I vicariously channeled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience. (54)

Himself born in St. Kitts before immigrating to Great Britain as a child, Phillips's experience provides a window into the narrator and her author's lives coming of age in France during the same period. The persecution of Jewish people thus provides a lens through which Phillips, the narrator, and Pineau come to understand racial dynamics.

The narrator's attachment to the diary speaks to her own efforts to understand her personal narrative. After Man Ya's return to Guadeloupe, she lacks the support that her grandmother's lessons and narratives have provided. Without Man Ya's help in keeping her connected with the stories, it becomes difficult for the narrator to maintain her connection to her homeland. Danielle Licops examines Pineau's narrator as a combination of French and Antillean influences: "The migrant child's identity is always a negotiation between imposed and half-created, half-inherited texts which are always in conflict with each other. The latter are always in danger of being erased by a more powerful narrative" (84). Without Man Ya, the narrator would rely on her parents to model Antillean identity, but their own assimilation makes them incapable of doing so. Between her parental and school influence, the narrator has trouble finding a source of affirmation of her new Antillean self that she formerly found with Man Ya. However, the narrator's mother provides a connection to this self by giving the young girl *Anne Frank: The*

Diary of a Young Girl. Anne Frank's experiences provide support in addition to Man Ya's already existing narratives and encourage the narrator's dream of becoming a writer.

The most recent version of Frank's diary was collected from various published versions of the text. Frank, a young Jewish teenage girl, went into hiding from the Nazis with her family and several other people. The diary chronicles daily life as she struggles to come to terms with her Jewish identity in the face of institutionalized hatred and with the physical and mental changes that accompany the teenage years. As a marginalized young woman herself, the narrator feels an intense connection to Anne. Anne's intent is to inform those coming after her about the difficulties in the Secret Annex; in the foreword to the definitive edition of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, additional information is given about her motives:

Anne Frank kept a diary from 12 June 1942 to 1 August 1944. Initially, she wrote strictly for herself. Then, one day in 1944, Gerrit Bolkestein, a member of the Dutch government in exile, announced in a radio broadcast from London that after the war he hoped to collect eyewitness accounts of the suffering of the Dutch people under the German occupation... Impressed by this speech, Anne Frank decided that when the war was over she would publish a book based on her diary. She began rewriting and editing her diary, improving on the text, omitting passages she didn't think were interesting enough and adding others from memory. (Frank v)

These journalistic intentions demonstrate Frank's maturity and drive; because she wants to write despite her isolation and marginalization, she creates her diary. In the first entry of the diary, Frank writes: "I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope that you will be a great source of comfort and support" (1). While Frank later has dreams of publication, these initial statements also demonstrate her need for a confidant and a need for a space where she can give a voice to her self. Thirteen years old when the family went into hiding, Frank attempts to develop her identity through writing to a "girl" of her own age. For the fifth entry in the diary, Anne shifts from addressing no one at all to addressing a friend named "Kitty," and thus, the structure of the diary shifts into that of an

epistolary text. While Kitty is a figment of Frank's imagination, giving a name to her confidant allows the work to feel more personal and less journalistic. Rachel Feldhay Brenner asserts the following: "As the marker of the epistolary form of the Diary, 'Kitty' communicates Frank's need for an audience. Writing to a particular, singled-out reader highlights the therapeutic function of the imagined addressee" (122). "Kitty," as an imagined addressee, is also an ideal correspondent. A name like "Kitty" implies that this imagined friend is a young woman like Frank. Kitty becomes Frank's double and mirrors her as Frank writes one-sided letters in a self-reflexive act. Taking into consideration Kitty's role, Frank works to come to terms with her marginalization through writing to a confidant.

Like Anne Frank's diary of letters addressed to the imaginary "Kitty," the narrator takes the opportunity to write to Man Ya because she will not receive a response. Indeed, she is able to unburden her soul *because* she will not receive a response. In the same way that Anne Frank used her diary as a space of self-development, the narrator also endeavors to do so. Rather than timidly proclaiming that she has a secret that she cannot divulge, she now states that she will write the story of her own life like Anne Frank. The act of writing one's autobiography can also be the ultimate act of self-affirmation. Thus, the narrator once again takes to the writing of her letters/journal in an effort to heal the wounds inflicted by Madame Baron's abuse. Inspired by Anne Frank, the narrator begins to understand that the written word is accessible even to those for whom society has disdain. She explains the contents and history of the diary to Man Ya, who will assuredly also comprehend Frank's plight. In the spirit of commiseration, the narrator draws strength from Frank's story; seeing no representation of her own racial persecution in other works or in the history she learns at school, the narrator feels an affinity with Jewish Frank.

As the narrator feels compelled to write just as Frank did, much of the therapeutic gesture deals with Frank's persecution rather than that of the author: "Depuis que j'ai lu le *Journal* d'Anne Franck, je vois la vie différemment et je me dis qu'en d'autres endroits du monde, au même moment, il doit se trouver des enfants qui vivent encore comme Anne Franck. Des fils invisibles nous relient pour que nous restions debout sur la terre." (Pineau 154). Realizing that she is not the only child enduring rejection, she finds solace in the possibility that she is not the only person suffering. This connection to other marginalized children briefly assuages the melancholia of being Other. However, her enthusiasm does not last; she states: "Finalement, je me rends compte que je ne t'envoie plus du tout courrier. Je suis une copieuse. J'imité Anne Franck et j'écris à un cahier. Toi, tu remplaces Kitty, sauf que tu existes vraiment. Un jour, quand je retournerai en Guadeloupe, je te lirai ces pages" (Pineau 156). Because she believes herself to be a fraud, the narrator no longer wants to write. Just as Man Ya regresses in her final prayer after speaking out about Asdrubal, the narrator returns to understanding her ego as degraded and stops making progress in the face of melancholia. Having absorbed the abject object version of her self into her ego, it is difficult for her to maintain the agency necessary to continue writing. However, the situation is even more complicated because the narrator understands that the letters are non-solipsistic and that they are a genuine tool for communication and dialogue.

As the traumatic effects of racism have built up in the narrator's mind, so has her desire to remain silent. Considering that her instinct after she has written about the incident to Man Ya is to destroy the letter, the narrator discredits herself by claiming that her letters are unoriginal. The narrator wants to repress the negative experience by stopping writing; in other words, by not writing about Madame Baron, it is as if she never existed. Unfortunately, this plan fails. Because

the narrator has no resolution for the trauma that she has sustained, she has nightmares in which Madame Baron continues to persecute her in the classroom. Although I have already noted the courage that it took the young narrator to disclose her troubles to her ideal reader, Man Ya, her inability to work through the traumatic experience solely through writing causes her to look for other options. While the epistolary act reveals the narrator's first attempts at self-development in the face of many damaging forces, it is ultimately a spoken testimony to her sister that allows her to begin to recover:

J'ai raconté à Lisa le temps que j'avais passé sous le bureau de Madame Baron. Ça m'a soulagée. Les cauchemars allaient me tuer une de ces nuits. Hier soir, Madame Baron me montrait le bureau avec sa règle. Je suis rentrée à quatre pattes. Mais elle ne s'est pas assise cette fois. Dessous ses jupes, elle a sorti des planches, des clous, et un marteau. Et le bureau est devenu une caisse qu'elle a jetée à la mer. Je me suis réveillée en pleurs et Lisa a passé un bras autour de mes épaules. C'est là que je lui ai tout raconté. (Pineau 157)

Whereas the narrator cannot find comfort in the epistolary act, she is able to find comfort in speaking to her sister Lisa. However, it was the written letter which prepared her to be able to orally express her traumatic experience. Thus, the written and oral exist in conjunction with each other for the narrator, just as Pineau created a meeting of the two in Man Ya's prayers. Following Laub's assertion that a listener is necessary in the witnessing process, the narrator's sister's role as a listener helps the teenager to put to rest her troubling nightmares. In the next letter to Man Ya, she states: "Madame Baron n'est pas réapparue depuis plusieurs nuits" (Pineau 158).

As the novel's epistolary section comes to a close, the narrator's father decides to move the family back to the Antilles after his idol, Charles de Gaulle, leaves the presidency. This provides the narrator with an opportunity to both reunite with Man Ya and to finally return to the place where she believes that she belongs. Having also been able to witness to her trauma in both

written and oral forms, she proceeds into her new life with less of a burden from her experience of abuse. While still understanding that there are racist people in France, she is able to enjoy being around people who share a cultural background in Martinique: “Les visages expriment mêmes souffrances et mêmes rêves. Le créole que Man Ya nous causait est ici, dans les rues, au marché, à l’école, en liberté” (Pineau 175). As the narrator discusses her new adventures in Martinique, she tells the story of attempting to find the beach with some of her siblings. They walk through Fort-de-France, and the narrator celebrates the sights and sounds of the people around her. Rather than being frightened by being lost in the city, she feels a part of the surrounding world for the first time; she no longer feels “Other.” Because of the nostalgia that the narrator has for her interactions with Man Ya, she associates the Creole language with the feelings of home and love that Man Ya inspires. She feels substantial relief in hearing Créole despite the fact that she does not speak it well because its usage implies that she is in a place where people will accept her. In her young mind, she is home.

The narrator’s inability to cultivate a stable identity engenders confusion: “J’ai longtemps gardé le sentiment d’avoir perdu quelque chose: une formule qui perçait jadis les geôles, un breuvage souverain délivrant la connaissance, une mémoire, des mots, des images. J’ai nourri en moi cette perte, pesante comme un deuil, manque sans définition” (Pineau 20). In the same article that I have used in my discussions about Man Ya and Maréchal, Sam Haigh examines the narrator’s experience of exile as unique from that of the others. He argues:

Her racial grief takes the form of a desire to find wholeness and perfection elsewhere, and she experiences a sense of loss that resembles the nostalgia of her grandmother, but without the specific geographical location, Guadeloupe, to which it can be attached. For her, it is an ill-defined sense of ‘homelessness’ and she attaches it, at different times, to various geographical locations in her search for a concrete place with which to identify it. (247-248)

Both her attempt to envision life in stereotypical Africa and her attempts to engage with the French literary canon after the classroom abuse constitute instances of her racial grief; in both situations, she is seeking to repair the rupture in her identity by filling the fissure with a false sense of belonging. She does not belong in either place, and this realization provokes the narrator to respond similarly to Man Ya. Rather than the pathological reaction of melancholia, she mourns her lack of immediate “home.” While the narrator repeats the feelings of loss like the other authors in this project, she does not internalize this loss in the same fashion. Because she does not have a fixed point in the past upon which to fix nostalgic longing (as Man Ya does), she must continue her search to find such a place. Fanon notes being in a similar bind as he tries to negotiate his own exile: “En vérité, en vérité je vous le dis, mes épaules ont glissé de la structure du monde, mes pieds n’ont plus senti la caresse du sol. Sans passé nègre, sans avenir nègre, il m’était impossible d’exister ma nègrerie. Pas encore blanc, plus tout à fait noir, j’étais un damné” (*Peau noire* 112). Neither white nor African, the narrator struggles to understand her place. However, the connection that the narrator forges with Guadeloupe through Man Ya’s stories allow her to avoid falling into the same melancholia as Fanon.

The beach trip scene portrays the island through the narrator’s unrealistic, childish understanding of her surroundings. She idealizes the island in an effort to confirm the idealization that Man Ya engaged in during her exile in France. She has spent such significant time constructing this ideal space where she could mentally flee whenever her life in France became overwhelming. This need to have a safe space causes her to disregard any conflicting experiences that she may have. At school in Martinique, the narrator meets other young girls that treat her more inclusively than her classmates did in France. However, she still does not quite fit in: “J’ai des amies...négresses et chabines de mon âge qui sont venues au-devant moi. Elles rient

de mon créole grené de RRR, de tous les mots français qui comblent les trous de la méconnaissance. Elles se moquent de mon ignorance quant à des choses élémentaires essentielles à ma survie ici” (Pineau 188). Rather than being mocked for her skin color, the other students now mock the narrator for her poor Creole abilities. However, she does not seem to internalize these criticisms as much as earlier ones and continues to speak with her new friends. Because she has attached so much meaning to the Antillean space as an idealized paradise, she cannot entertain thoughts that are as ambivalent as those she has pertaining to France. Having created a positive Antillean identity in addition to the negative French one, the narrator fights any ambivalence because her positive view of herself as Antillean is predicated on a positive view of that place. She has spent a significant amount of time re-valorizing the islands as she heard conflicting stories from her parents and Man Ya.

Considering her parents’ troubled relationship with their homeland, this idealized portrayal is difficult to maintain. After the beach trip scene, the narrator discusses the five “plagues” that her family encounters after they arrive; she indicates that she is somewhat frightened by the new animals and insects that surround her. Having discussed the insects, the narrator begins describing various reptiles, with a specific fear about “les mabouyas,” a type of omnivorous lizard. She states that she does not want to believe that stories that she has been told about mabuyas and notes: “Le nom seul fait déjà suer, mabouya. La première fois qu’on en voit un, on reste sans voix. On croit à un bout de cauchemar resté pris au plafond... Leur peau est transparente et pale. Pourquoi Man Ya ne nous a donc jamais causé de mabouyas?” (Pineau 200). These lizards and the fear that they inspire are one of the negative aspects of the Antillean experience that the narrator did not envision in her idealized island. She even wonders why Man Ya did not tell her about these horrible creatures. However, just as Man Ya inevitably returns to

a sanitized vision of Asdrubal at the end of her prayers, the narrator represses any of the fear or linguistic frustration that she feels to preserve the Antillean self that she has constructed. After the section detailing the plagues, the narrator depicts her reunion with both of her grandmothers in Guadeloupe, with a specific emphasis on Man Ya. As the family approaches Man Ya without forewarning her about their arrival, she breaks into a jubilant dance. Man Ya takes this opportunity to show everyone her garden. This garden is at the center of the narrator's image of Guadeloupe, and as she describes the garden, she reaffirms the image that she had constructed throughout the novel:

Man Ya nous montait tous ses bois, les alentours, la cour, l'amour de son jardin. Sa vanille prolifique. Son pied de quénettes, ses pommes-lianes. Le muscadier géant... Ses yeux disaient: Vous m'avez présenté la figure de la France, à présent regardez mon pays, tel qu'en lui-même avec ses hauts et bas. Il y a sûrement ailleurs d'autres terres aimées que des femmes et des hommes ne veulent pas quitter. Il y a sûrement ailleurs des terres plus belles, moins ingrates, sans cyclones ni tremblements, ni raz de marée. Des terres intéressantes avec des gens accueillants qui méritent un détour. Des terres qui n'ont pas connu le sang, n'ont même jamais porté la terreur. Mais personne ne peut m'empêcher de vouloir vivre et puis mourir ici, puisqu'il faudra bien mourir quelque part même si on fait cent fois le tour de la terre dans sa seule vie... (Pineau 217)

This passage once again represents both sides of the Antillean experience: the beauty of Man Ya's garden is juxtaposed with the violence that Guadeloupe has known. However, while stating that she would like to live and die on the island, the narrator also seems to be searching for another place where she could belong. Because of the difficulties of life in Guadeloupe, she asserts that there must be better places to live, but she then tosses the concerns aside in favor of a return to affirmation.

The novel ends soon after these reunions. As for the quality of life that Man Ya and the narrator enjoy after this prodigal journey, the reader learns nothing. Life in Guadeloupe represents significantly less space in the text than life in France, and thus, the narrator maintains

distance from the reader in discussion of her Antillean existence. The novel's final paragraph reveals that Man Ya has died:

Je n'ai jamais pleuré la mort de Man Ya. Elle n'est jamais partie, jamais sortie de mon cœur. Elle peut aller et virer à n'importe quel moment dans mon esprit. Sauter d'une branche. Montez-les et cætera de marches du Sacré-Cœur. Son jardin de Routiers est plein de sa présence. Et les jours à haler jusqu'au soir sont moins lourds à ses bords. Elle est là, dans le temps d'aujourd'hui, vivante. Des fois, elle porte l'habit militaire. Elle écrit Julia sur une ardoise dans une facilité que tu ne peux pas comprendre. Elle ne rondit plus son dos au fouet de son Bourreau. Elle est assise sur une nuage. Elle rit et mange des mangos roses. (Pineau 219)

In light of this final passage, the novel takes on a different meaning. As both the narrator and Man Ya work to assuage encroaching melancholia through their missives, they maintain contact with the beloved homeland. Since both are allowed to return to the Antilles before their traumatic exile becomes irrevocable, these characters seem less troubled than the characters of the two authors that follow. However, this lack of trouble comes at a cost; because of the need to repress feelings of ambivalence, Pineau's portrayal of the family's life upon return to the homeland at times seems one-dimensional. Considering the revelation of Man Ya's death, one could read the novel as Pineau's narrator's personal journey of grief after the death of her grandmother. While the narrator and Man Ya avoided melancholia based on their exile, this passage indicates that the entire text represents an effort at mourning Man Ya. It is interesting that the novel does not present this very important fact until the end. In this sense, Pineau chooses to present the text as a meditation on exile rather than an obsessive cycle of grief after Man Ya's death. Contrasting with the reaction to the father's death that I will examine in the following chapter on Linda Lê, this passage includes no self-reproach or anger. Instead, the narrator maintains a happy and nostalgic image of Man Ya, much like the images of the homeland that she has presented throughout her narrative.

CHAPTER TWO: *LETTRE MORTE*

I. Introduction

In her 2005 collection of essays, *Le Complexe de Caliban*, Linda Lê states: “L’histoire de mon âme est celle de l’exil, du deuil et de la folie qui les accompagne” (86). While Lê is speaking frankly here about the nature of her own troubles, the narrators and characters of her fictional works also experience significant difficulties with exile and loss. Consistent with the sentiments that Lê expresses in her essay, the Bulgarian critic Julia Kristeva analyses modern exile in *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Because she immigrated to France during the 1960s, Kristeva’s understanding of the psychological experience of foreignness inflects much of her critical production. Many of her works provide a lens through which to view the traumatic experience of exile in a melancholic subject. Alluding to the suffering of the immigrant to France, Kristeva explains: “N’appartenir à aucun lieu, aucun temps, aucun amour. L’origine perdue, l’enracinement impossible, la mémoire plongeante, le présent en suspens” (17-18). Unable to reconcile the loss of country, Kristeva’s “étranger” becomes further and further estranged from a coherent identity though the lost love object.

This estrangement has parallels in familial relationships. With the eye of a psychoanalyst, she draws comparisons between the mother and the father and the new and lost countries:

...incompris d’une mère aimée et cependant distraite, discrète ou préoccupée, l’exilé est étranger à sa mère. Il ne l’appelle pas, ne lui demande rien. Orgueilleux, il s’attache fièrement à ce qui lui manque, à l’absence, à quelque symbole. L’étranger serait l’enfant d’un père dont l’existence ne fait aucun doute, mais dont la présence ne le retient pas. Le rejet d’un côté, l’inaccessible de l’autre...Aucun obstacle ne l’arrête, et toutes les souffrances, toutes les insultes, tous les rejets lui sont indifférents dans la quête de ce territoire invisible et promis, de ce pays qui n’existe pas mais qu’il porte dans son rêve, et qu’il faut bien appeler un au-delà. (Kristeva 14)

Kristeva's quest displays the damage of the parental relationships that extends into the exile's later experience of lost country. Like the lost country, the father was present but could not hold the attention of the exiled subject. However, the remaining difficulties stemming from the departure extend not just to the homeland but also to the incomprehensible father. The more profound wound occurs in the maternal relationship; the exile's mother's rejection becomes a precursor for the rejection of the exiled in the adopted country. Condemned to repeat this painful rejection, the exile immigrates to a country that will inevitably reject him and his foreignness. In many ways, she desires to perpetuate her early suffering. Kristeva expands upon this notion and asserts: "Une blessure secrète, souvent inconnue de lui-même, propulse l'étranger dans l'errance" (14). For the exile, with a lack of stable origins, the injuries of rejection have caused her to be unable to remain in a fixed location. The perceived loss of country combined with the initial loss of the mother provokes the exile's descent into melancholia that perpetuates by remaining in the country that rejects her as she did. The critic continues: "Au contraire, selon la logique extrême de l'exil, tous les buts devraient se consumer et se détruire dans la folle lancée de l'errant vers un ailleurs toujours repoussé, inassouvi, inaccessible" (Kristeva *Étrangers* 15). For Lê, as for Kristeva and for those other exiled people whom she describes the homeland's loss renders *errance* the only tenable existence.

Lê was born in 1963, and she spent the first years of her life in Dalat in what was then South Vietnam. In 1969, her family fled south to Saigon to avoid escalating problems caused by the war in the Central Highlands. This move to Saigon would provide the opportunity for Lê to begin studies in French at a *lycée* before emigrating to Le Havre with her mother and sisters in 1977. This move took place as part of a wave of Vietnamese migration that began in 1975 and continued for nearly twenty years. As the Vietnamese fled the country after the fall of Saigon

and the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Lê and her family formed part of the hundreds of thousands of refugees that left (Vo 55-100). After her arrival in France at the age of fourteen, Lê completed her French education and received her *baccalauréat*. Lê completed university studies and worked on a doctoral thesis on a nineteenth-century francophone Swiss writer, Henri Frédéric Amiel (257). Lê published her first novel, *Un si tendre vampire*, nine years after her arrival in France. She followed this first novel with another, *Fuir* (1987), and *Solo* (1988), a collection of short stories. Since 1992, Lê has published sixteen additional works, most of which comment on the author's persistent feelings of *étrangeté* and marginalization. Because of these feelings, Lê often addresses the cultural conflict of exile and the traumatic experience that extends from deracination.

Lê's 1999 novel *Lettre morte* represents the last novel of what critics have termed Lê's trauma trilogy. The first two novels of the trilogy were 1997's *Les Trois Parques* and 1998's *Voix: une crise*. Termed the trauma trilogy because Lê began writing the novels after the death of her beloved father, this series of texts portrays Lê's long effort to grieve his death. Complicating an already tragic experience, Lê's grief only intensifies due to the guilt she feels. Despite having a close relationship with her father, Lê left him behind in Vietnam when she left for France in 1977 and never returned to her native country before his death. Whereas Lê begins her engagement with the trauma of her father's death in these first two novels, she does not create a coherent portrait of her suffering until *Lettre morte*. The first two texts of the trilogy display images clouded by mental illness. However, through these images, one can understand the effects of the trauma, and structural and narrative coherence is of little importance. Her father's death, while contributing to trauma in her life, does not constitute the sole source of damage.

Lê's work both before and after the publication of the trauma trilogy indicates uneasiness with the self that implies deeper and earlier emotional injury.

Lettre morte begins with an unnamed narrator's lamentations about the death of her father. She also introduces her friend Sirius as she discusses her father's death, and he becomes a sounding board for her misery. In the pages that follow, the narrator continues writing through her grief and reflects on various memories of her childhood in Vietnam. These memories mostly center on her relationship with her father. She reveals these memories and the subsequent guilt that she feels at having abandoned her father for a new life in France. While she may mostly focus on her father in these initial pages, she also details her failed romantic liaison with a Frenchman named Morgue. Whereas she had written to her father since the beginning of her exile, the narrator castigates herself for letting her correspondence with him lapse before his death because she had been writing self-torturing letters to Morgue. Her relationship prevented her from realizing that her father was desperate to see her and that he was dying. Because she chose her relationship with the Frenchman Morgue over the letters and love of her father, she descends into a crippling spiral of guilt. She goes on to make veiled allusions to her trip to Vietnam for her father's funeral. At the novel's end, she asks her friend Sirius to open the window so that she can see the dawn light and speaks in a hopeful tone about a new day.

Any short description of this novel must also take into account the narrative structure. The novel's name would cause one to immediately assume that it is an epistolary text. However, Lê does not follow commonly used features of the genre. Even in the modern, more diary-like letter narrative exemplified by *Une si longue lettre*, Mariama Bâ includes a salutation to her intended addressee as the novel's very first line, thus giving the initial impression that one is reading a letter. By contrast, Lê does not include any salutation and instead launches directly into

the text's body. This lack of clear addressee is initially confusing, but as the reader progresses through the novel, the reasoning behind Lê's decision to omit this tradition becomes clear due to the shifts in listener/reader. Is the novel's intended audience the narrator's deceased father? Is it her friend Sirius? Is it the narrator herself in a self-reflexive exercise? The answer is that it is all three. This self-reflexive exercise does not constitute an attempt at positive self-construction by Lê; however, in contrast with the modern epistolary acts like those of Pineau's narrator and Bâ's Ramatoulaye, Lê's use of the letter form is not a redemptive act. While Pineau's narrator uses her letters to reconnect to Guadeloupe and her grandmother in a constructive effort, Lê's narrator repeats the trauma of her exile through epistolarity. The letter and letter writing become the narrative space in which Lê's narrator perpetuates her experience of melancholia.

Critics have tended to read *Lettre morte* as the resolution of the Lê's trauma after two significantly more mentally unstable narratives. Emily Vaughn Roberts argues: "The narrator's resolution of her relationship with the past and her father is signaled by his funeral, and her release from an unsatisfactory, guilt-ridden dialogic relationship with him conducted through letters. The ghost of the guilt of the exile is laid to rest, and the vision of the world generated by trauma fades" (339). I contend, by contrast to Roberts, that this novel in no way represents the end of Lê's struggle with trauma and melancholia. While the novel's narrator feels the profound effects of losing her father, she has sustained emotional trauma before she loses him, and thus, his funeral does not demarcate the end of her struggles. The novel's closing pages imply that the narrator has achieved some sort of recovery, but the re-emergence of the father and the epistolary image in the 2002 short story "Anatomie d'une illusion" implies that this healing has not occurred. While she seems to have testified to the trauma provoked by her father's death, the narrator has not fully testified to the earlier trauma inflicted by her destructive experience of

exile. Thus, the narrator is able to appear as if she has mourned his death when in reality her continuing melancholia stems from earlier wounds and has yet to be resolved.

As the novel details the relationships with the father and Morgue and the narrator's encounters in both Vietnam and France, the letter occupies a central place in the discussion of the father. The narrator's obsession with her father's letters engenders an intense association between the father and the letter; the letters thus become the physical embodiment of the deceased father. The narrator also discusses and obsesses over the missives that she writes to and receives from Morgue. Because they are a central image, letters contribute to the compulsive return to the narrator's sense of loss, guilt, and self-devaluation. For Lê, the letter becomes a space of trauma that allows her to relive her suffering and self-destruction neurotically. Lê and *Lettre morte*'s narrator, both unable to reconcile this suffering descend into the pattern of *errance* that Kristeva describes. Perpetually in exile from her "self," the narrator relives her trauma through her inability to find satisfaction in a fixed place. Therefore, while the novel's conclusion presents some hope, the narrator's continued need for *errance* demonstrates that there remains significant psychological work left to do.

The narrator's wandering impulse is not the only aspect of the text that demonstrates mental troubles. Through the predominance of images of suicide, self injury, and mental illness in *Lettre morte*, Lê depicts Freud's melancholia. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud states that mourning constitutes the optimal response to grief in which the grieving person is able to healthily work through his/her psychological pain. By contrast, melancholia is a pathological condition that has extreme consequences in the collapse of sufferer's ego and a resulting devaluation of self. As Freud states, this self-devaluation often makes itself known through extreme guilt and a tendency towards self-punishment. As the title of their incisive article, "Guilt

and Betrayal in the Works of Azouz Begag and Linda Lê,” implies, Kathryn Lay-Chenchabi and Tess Do note Lê’s thematic guilt in several works. However, the critics focus on guilt and betrayal without fully acknowledging the pathological nature of Lê’s responses. Other critics have broached Freudian theory in their discussions but have not engaged with more than the trauma trilogy. For example, Martine Delvaux characterizes Lê’s writing as that of mourning when it is actually that of melancholia:

Drowned heads floating in the Seine, an endless series of decapitated bodies, strange faces in the streets of Paris: these images mirror the narrator’s diffraction, multiplicity, and fragmentation, as well as her displacement. The hyphenation mentioned earlier, the impossibility of belonging either to the country of exile or to the homeland, or of leaving either one of them. The chorus of voices that haunt the narrator and that constitute the symptom of her madness also signifies the complexity of her identity: the perpetual state of mourning which lies at the core of her existence, the perpetual haunting that determines her. (Delvaux 206)

Much of Delvaux’s commentary here centers on the violent images in 1998’s *Voix: une crise*. Delvaux focuses on the narrator’s madness as demonstrative of her complicated identity. Unlike Delvaux, however, I would not accept madness as the sole explanation for the multiplying voices and identities. As the critic herself states in the last sentence of this passage, this is a “perpetual” mourning. In Freud’s characterization of mourning, one is eventually able to work through the loss and let go of the lost love object and thus complete the mourning process in a healthy fashion. By contrast, melancholia is a pathological neurosis and is not as easily overcome. While Delvaux characterizes this as mourning, Anne Cousseau has stated that in *Voix: une crise* “tous les symptômes de la dépression mélancolique y figurent sous une forme presque clinique” (205). She goes on to extend this discussion of melancholia to the other novels of the trauma trilogy:

La souffrance mélancolique émerge peu à peu des profondeurs de la conscience. Elle était déniée et cependant symboliquement présente dans l’éclatement énonciatif des *Trois Parques*...Violemment libérée et mise en scène au travers de scénarios fantasmatiques

dans *Voix*, la souffrance mélancolique est enfin poétiquement maîtrisée dans *Lettre morte*. Elle s'offre ainsi comme le vecteur structurant du cheminement initiatique d'un sujet qui se construit. (Cousseau 206)

While Cousseau's examination of melancholia in the trauma trilogy contributes to my overarching argument, I believe that she does not extend her examination to include enough of Lê's melancholic pattern. In the final sentence of this passage, Cousseau indicates that through mastering the poetics of melancholia that Lê is able to establish subjectivity. However, my question remains: Why do Lê's essays, interviews, and novels continue to allude to emotional turmoil if she has poetically mastered her melancholia? Relating to this question is Lê's repetitive obsession with the letter image and her continued use of it as part of a destructive cycle of self-devaluation.

Taking into consideration Freud's definitions of melancholia and mourning, we see that both Lê and her narrators/characters experience something more than grief, guilt, or even mourning. Through obsessively repeated images and statements that indicate her narrator's sense of lacking self-worth, Lê reenacts her feelings of guilt and worthlessness stemming from her departure from Vietnam and subsequent exile. Lily V. Chiu discusses another layer of Lê's troubled relationship with her homeland and draws attention to the country's colonial history and its damaging effects:

During both colonialism and its aftermath, traumatic loss, as experience by the colonized "native," is incurred through a variety of reasons. In the colonial period, there is a loss of freedom and individual subjectivity on the part of the colonized. In the postcolonial period, and in particular Vietnam's postcolonial period, there is a forcible and violent uprooting of the postcolonial subject who must leave her native land. Not only does she suffer the physical loss of family and country, she must also bear the more psychical losses of language and culture, in assimilating (completely or incompletely) to her newfound immigrant/refugee identity. In many cases of the overseas Vietnamese, who cannot mourn the loss of their country since that country is now in control of the very government which forced them to flee, the loss is unacknowledged and unavowed. This inability (or sometimes refusal) to acknowledge the trauma caused by the loss can be either on the part of the traumatized subject (primary witness) or on the part of another

complicit in the trauma (secondary witness. In either case, the unacknowledged trauma can lead to melancholia. (“An Open Wound”)

Chiu notes the unacknowledged nature of the trauma for postcolonial subjects and how this ignored trauma opens the door for melancholia. In interviews that she has given, Lê has expressed a striking view of her nationality or rather lack thereof. Despite the fact that her novels frequently allude to a homeland in Southeast Asia, Lê claims that she feels no definite connection to any place:

...I know that, in general, people consider me a French author, but I don't feel like a French author. Then again, I don't feel like a Vietnamese author either. Perhaps we shouldn't talk of origins; perhaps to a certain extent we always write having broken with our origins, whether these origins be one's family or one's homeland. Maybe that is one of the fundamental conditions of writing. It's true that I've doubled and that I've questioned my real identity, but I've also always been aware that the only real identity I can have is the one that I create for myself through the books I write. (Lê and Barnes 53-54)

As Chiu notes, Lê clearly suffers from a certain amount of trauma that she cannot understand; however, I contend that this psychological damage is not unacknowledged or ignored; rather, the author represses it, and yet, she cannot fully sustain this repression and reveals it through repetition of images and themes. In their respective departures from Vietnam, Lê and her protagonists throughout her work sustain the initial blows of the traumatic separation from two love objects: the father and Vietnam.

In her article “A Vietnamese Voice in the Dark: Three Stages in the Corpus of Linda Lê,” Emily Vaughn Roberts tackles the various mental spaces present in Lê's works. Roberts argues: “This in-between space will be examined as ‘the state of the exile’ in terms of the space that exile occupies and the condition of the exile. The two are inextricably linked, as the exile figure ironically seeks to resolve an overwhelming sense of duality and isolation through entry into this amoral, ambivalent space” (Roberts 332). In later paragraphs, Roberts defines this “state of

exile” as a dual/hybrid space from which Lê’s narratives emerge. However, Lê’s texts, unlike those of many postcolonial authors, do not neatly package hybridity as a valid or desirable option for her protagonist’s identity. Lê’s “state of exile” thus does not create a hybrid space with any sort of positive resolution to her identity; rather, this exile produces a melancholic literary space that constantly reproduces and reaffirms the author’s psychic rupture and marginalization. By using a version of the fort/da game as we shall see, Lê engenders an oppressive exile through the image of the letter. For the author, the letter represents border crossing and movement and also functions as a reminder of her father and her idealized lost childhood in Vietnam. By returning to the letters repeatedly, she is melancholically reenacting earlier scenes of her youth from when she first left her father behind. In the process of her compulsive rereading of her father’s letters, Lê transforms it into a space of neurotic suffering. Because the letter will never represent anything other than loss or absence, it becomes the image through which the narrator represents her own exile.

Due to Lê’s specific difficulties, her narrative theme requires that we expand our understanding of melancholia to include concepts from Freud’s earlier essay, “On Narcissism.” Incorporating self-love into the object loss of melancholia, Freud demonstrates that the feelings of self-devaluation stem from more than one source. I assert that Lê’s frequent portrayal of incest shows a desire to love the self in a narcissistic fashion. By seeking a love object similar to themselves, Lê’s characters attempt to introject this love object to engage with their rootlessness; by entering into a sexual relationship with someone who is also Vietnamese, these characters are able to reaffirm their culture and racial background. In this chapter, I will explore the relationship between narcissism and melancholia throughout Lê’s *œuvre*. I will then detail Lê’s extensive use of the epistolary image and form in three works preceding *Lettre morte*. With this

pattern established, I will trace Lê's melancholic obsession with the letter, the father, and the homeland through *Lettre morte*. Finally, in the concluding subsection, I will look at one additional work that uses an epistolary structure that Lê has published since 1999. Using this progression, we see that Lê's melancholic response does not begin or end with her dead letter. The reader can understand that Lê's usage of the letter indicates a pathological pattern through the obsessive reappearance of the missive.

II. Narcissism and Melancholia

One of the defining symptoms of melancholia according to Freud is narcissism. Freud differentiates between two forms of narcissism: primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism is a stage of ego development in children; in this stage, the libido focuses on the self as the locus of sexual desire rather than on outside objects. As the infant develops, the focus typically shifts from this ego-libido (libido turning inwards) to the object-libido (libido going outwards). Freud emphasizes that the ego does not exist at birth and insists that it must be developed. Secondary narcissism manifests later, and in it, the libido withdraws from external objects. Afterwards, the self once again becomes the libido's focus. This is an indication of pathology and of further psychic difficulties like dementia praecox (now known as schizophrenia). The withdrawal of libidinal energy from the outside world creates a crisis in the love-object: "Closer observation teaches us that he also withdraws *libidinal* interest from his love objects: so long as he suffers, he ceases to love. We should then say: the sick man withdraws his libidinal cathexes back upon his own ego, and sends them out again when he recovers" ("Narcissism" 82). Thus, for someone suffering under a pathological secondary narcissism, it is impossible to love anything other than the self. Freud establishes a brief comparison between the

narcissistic and attachment types that reflects the differences between ego-libido and object-libido in a practical application:

A person may love: -

- (1) According to the narcissistic type:
 - (a) what he himself is (i.e. himself),
 - (b) what he himself was,
 - (c) what he himself would like to be,
 - (d) someone who once was part of himself.
 - (2) According to the anaclitic (attachment) type:
 - (a) the woman who feeds him,
 - (b) the man who protects him,
- and the succession of substitutes who take their place. (90)

Freud continues by attempting to find the causes of the narcissistic disturbance. Detailing the infantile sexual development through attachment to the mother and the subsequent castration anxiety, Freud arrives at the beginnings of the narcissistic disturbance: repression. In repression, a person curbs libidinal desires in adherence to laws, social customs, and expectations of authority figures such as parents. Freud asserts that there are two kinds of people: those who follow their libidinal desires (either in reality or in fantasy) and those who repress such desires. A person who represses her desires has developed an ego ideal,²¹ an idealized version of the self that governs actions and with which one compares the actual self. Disappointed by the shortcomings of the actual self in comparison with this ideal ego, the person's ego-libido shifts to fixate on the ideal ego:

This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgment, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal.

²¹ This concept was a forerunner to that of the super ego. For more on the super ego and its relation to melancholia, please see the introduction to this project.

What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal. ("Narcissism" 94)

A key point in Freud's description is the regressive nature of this narcissism; it implies a psychological return to childhood as an escape from the disappointment of the adult self. Freud specifically examines the effects of the object-cathexis choice of the ideal ego in paranoid patients. He argues that paranoia stems from the person's revolt against childhood's external laws and orders that have been integrated into the ideal ego; as the person revolts against these internalized rules, she begins to hear voices and have hallucinations.

Freud contends that the act of love requires that the libido transfer to an object outside of the self and that this transfer provokes a decrease in self-regard. However, if the object returns the love (or the ego believes that the object returns the love), self-regard increases. Thus, in love, narcissism diminishes with the giving of love but is confirmed by its return. Freud posits that our self-concept derives from three sources: primary narcissism (which never entirely goes away), the ego ideal's projections and our ability to live up to them, and the satisfaction of having our love returned. In the final pages of this essay, Freud also addresses the idealization of the object that occurs in love; neurotics may gain narcissistic satisfaction from loving another whom they see as a representation of their ideal ego. However, this satisfaction and the neurotic's dependence upon the object can eventually cause problems if the love relationship ends.

Freud develops his theories of narcissism one year later in 1915 in "Mourning and Melancholia." In defining mourning, Freud asserts that the mourner eventually accepts the reality that the lost love object has gone and never will return; in fact, the loss is a loss that exists in the conscious mind. While the process of mourning can take significant time, it is not impossible. In melancholia, the loss exists in the unconscious mind and thus is difficult to access and in turn to work through. In the unconscious mind: "...the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the

latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (MM 249). In the melancholic who displays narcissistic tendencies, the object-love has been displaced by narcissistic identification with the love object. This theory matches much of what Freud proposed in “On Narcissism,” but whereas he did not originally pinpoint the oral stage of child development as the locus of narcissistic tendencies in object relations, he now does: “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it (mm 250). Pushing narcissistic tendencies to an extreme, the ego subsumes the love object into itself and in the process begins the path towards melancholia.

As Juliana Schiesari asserts: “Set in these terms, therefore, the once loved object has been incorporated into the ego in order to maintain a tie with it because of a previous strong attachment having to do with primary narcissism. This narcissistic source of libidinal energy thus explains why this loss can be an ideal as well as a person, for what is invested in it is therefore still a form of the self” (47). When this love object is lost, the subject suffers a major blow to the ego and self-concept because the object had been integrated. As the object has been devoured, the melancholic subject’s ambivalence to the object continues. While Freud initially depicts this ambivalence as the result of some slight on the part of the love object, he also notes:

“Constitutional ambivalence belongs by its nature to the repressed; traumatic experiences in connection with the object may have activated other repressed material” (“Mourning” 257).

However ambivalent the relationship between the subject and the object may be, Freud describes the destructive effects of the object’s loss for the narcissist:

If the love of the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without a doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self... ("Mourning" 251)

As the object has been absorbed into the ego, all of the abuse that the melancholic subjects the object to is, in reality, sadistic self-abuse. Along with these self-abusive cycles comes the diminution of self-regard that is typical in melancholia; in punishing herself, the subject seeks to punish the love object and often succeeds. In the process of fueling this self and object hate, the painful experience becomes pleasurable, and the subject begins repeating it (a tendency that Freud explores in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* which I will discuss later in this chapter). If the melancholic's sadism manifests in an even more extreme form, this desire to punish the object transforms into suicidal tendencies. Freud explains:

The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object - if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego's original reaction to objects in the external world. Thus in regression from narcissistic object-choice the object has, it is true, been got rid of, but it has nevertheless proved more powerful than the ego itself. ("Mourning" 252)

As Lê's protagonists attempt suicide or engage in other self-destructive behavior in almost every one of her works, the reader begins to question the author's sadistic motivations for her characters. In many cases, it appears as if Lê is exacting some sort of revenge on characters who are similar to herself; in turn, when she damages and destroys these characters, Lê is treating the fictional manifestation of herself or of her ego as an object. Certain thematic aspects of Lê's novels clearly imply the narcissism that Freud so closely relates to melancholic experience. The characters' traumatic encounters become the point of departure for their pathology. Lê's texts depict many narcissistic tendencies, and of these, the most consistent is incest. In incest, one

seeks to unite with a similar person who reflects one's roots and identity. In other words, incest is narcissism in its extreme form.

In an article titled "From Incest to Exile: Linda Lê and the Incestuous Vietnamese Immigrants," Tess Do examines Lê's portrayal of incest in her novel *Les Trois Parques*, a work that recounts the story of two sisters (Ventre Rond and Belles Gambettes) and their cousin (La Manchote) who immigrated to France with their grandmother after the Communists came to power in Vietnam. When they immigrated, the sisters left their father behind. Known in the text as "le roi Lear," the daughters have invited him to France at the novel's beginning. La Manchote serves as the narrator and supplies brief sarcastic glimpses into the lives of her cousins. Ventre Rond is pregnant and married to an absent Westerner who follows the Dalai Lama. Belles Gambettes is coming to the end of her relationship with her boyfriend Théo and fixates on her physical appearance. La Manchote appears to be the most psychically disturbed of the three, however, fondling the stump where she once had a hand before it was amputated and emphatically murmuring "*Il n'est pas fou*." Later in the narrative, La Manchote's history explains her bizarre behavior. She had an incestuous liaison with her twin brother. As the novel comes to a close, the three women await the arrival of le roi Lear. He dies before accomplishing his voyage.

Do's analysis, while based primarily in her reading of *Les Trois Parques*, extends to other novels in Lê's corpus. Incestuous relationships are by no means limited to this novel. In fact, Lê engages with incest in many novels that contain significant epistolary imagery. Do's article summarizes three arguments about Lê's portrayal of incest: incest as Confucian patricide, incest as a quest for roots while in exile, and incest as narcissistic self-love. In each context, incest reflects a particularly melancholic disposition in which the love object is both a family member

and the homeland. In reference to Confucian doctrine, Do cites filial piety²² to clarify the reasons why incest would represent such a destructive act. In a traditional Confucian system, the father governs all children, the husband governs the wife, and the son governs the widow. Thus, if any incestuous act occurs with a brother, this hierarchical structure crumbles as the brother has figuratively served as the husband, displacing the father. Do asserts: “In Lê’s novels, incest reveals itself as something profoundly disturbing because it means both rebellion against and rejection of the parents. In fact, it foretells the symbolic murder of the father and announces the end of his reign as head of the family according to the Confucian hierarchy” (169).

Such a complicated and hostile relationship with the parents is on full display in *Les Trois Parques*. In the incestuous relationship that La Mancote has with her twin, she develops an emotional attachment to him but does not physically act on her feelings. Rather, it is her brother who acts on it: he rapes her. On some level, the siblings want to punish their parents and also punish themselves by revealing their resentment in an act that represents the destruction of the traditional family. In her discussion of *Les Trois Parques*, Do emphasizes the fact that La Manchote and her brother were twins. In her first explanation of the twin’s incestuous relationship, Do offers: “Two factors can explain incest: the first is their inborn and universal need for roots, intimacy, and protection; the second, the fear of the outside world and a feeling of insecurity” (170). While La Manchote’s incest occurs in the homeland, she searches for roots and reconnection with her deceased brother after her exile in France; already feeling like an outsider in her own family before her departure, she finds confirmation of her identity in her twin brother. However, finding such confirmation in a twin implies narcissism:

²² Filial piety is a concept that comes from Confucianism. At its most base level, it means to be good to one’s parents. Children can be good to their parents in many ways including, but not limited to: being courteous and respectful, ensuring that there are male heirs, maintaining good relations between brothers, mourning parents after their death, preparing the appropriate sacrifices to them after their death (98). For more on filial piety, please consult Hugh D. R. Baker’s *Chinese Family and Kinship*.

Nostalgia for this other half, either lost or buried within oneself, endows sibling incest with a narcissistic scope where love for the other is also a form of self-love. The unity of each twin couple is the most striking manifestation of this narcissism. The incestuous relationship that binds Manchote and Mortesaison with their respective twin/lover reaches such a degree of intensity that their burning desire for unity is transformed into a desire for a complete, symbiotic fusion... (Do 173)

La Manchote's rape by her twin comprises the ultimate act of self-love: a sexual relationship with a sibling who is one's mirror image. La Manchote is the subject/ego in question, and the brother represents the narcissistically introjected love object. In the consummation of the relationship, La Manchote devours her brother, takes him into herself. The act is clearly a rape, but La Manchote loves her brother despite his violence. La Manchote has introjected the brother into her ego, and his death strikes a critical blow to her ego. The brother not only represents a character, but he also becomes a metaphorical stand-in for the homeland; through incest, La Manchote unifies parts of herself through this sexual act.²³ The rape represents a rare moment of unification as the ego and object and the French and Vietnamese become one. As Do notes:

Vietnam, as a twin brother, represents in Lê's eyes both unity and loss: land of dreams, ancestors' land undivided, on the one hand; land of war and death, country cut in two at the seventeenth parallel, on the other. Separated from her homeland by war and exile, Lê visualizes her broken ties with Vietnam in the metaphor of her dead twin: 'Ma patrie, je la porte comme ce jeune paysan portait le fœtus de son jumeau. C'est un lien monstrueux. Un lien où le pays natal, le jumeau donc, est couvé et étouffé, reconnu et nié. Et finalement porté comme on porte un enfant mort'... Incestuous and monstrous ties, this is how Lê defines her relation to her birth country. In her works, incest has all the aspects of exile, return, reunion, belonging, wholeness. (173)

Thus, the narcissistic act of sibling love demonstrates Lê's authorial attempts to unite the ego with the ego ideal, the idealized love object and to return to a former state of fantasized wholeness. In reference to her brother, La Manchote repeatedly states "*Il n'est pas fou*" and speaks poetically of their relationship. On both accounts, she is idealizing their troubled interactions; by

²³ Sabine Loucif also notes this pattern in her article, "Linda Lê, la passeuse": "L'amour incestueux entre la narratrice et son jumeau peut ainsi se comprendre comme un acte désespéré d'amour de soi, de ses propres gènes, de sa propre race" (497).

continuing to love him so profoundly and repressing memories of his violence, she does not accept the reality of the situation and instead creates an ideal. In this sense, the brother functions as a double of his twin sister, and in her continued emotional involvement with him after his death, she looks to him as a source of support. Therefore, speaking in epistolary terms, the brother is La Manchote's ideal correspondent because he is the narcissistic love object upon whom La Manchote bases her self-concept.

III. Letter Image in Novels Before *Lettre morte*

Lê's epistolarity reflects a similar narcissistic tendency. The omnipresence of the letter in novels both before and after *Lettre morte* indicates the obsessive importance of the letter image for Lê. Unlike the other authors in this project, *Lettre morte* does not constitute Lê's only epistolary work. Rather, the epistolary structure appears in a form similar to that of *Lettre morte*'s one-sided letter in the 1992 short story "Vinh L." in *Les Évangiles du crime*, in the 2002 short story "Anatomie d'une illusion" in *Autres jeux avec le feu*, and in the 2010 novel *Cronos*. Historically, the one-sided epistolary text has functioned as both a space of traumatic abandonment (*Lettres portugaises*) and as a space of self-affirmation in a hostile society (*Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, *Une si longue lettre*). Lê's use of the letter in her novels is closer to that of Guilleragues's *Lettres portugaises* than it is to the others. An obsessive examination of loss and confusion, Lê's epistolary *œuvre* transforms the genre into a narcissistic form.

In *Linda Lê, l'écriture du manque*, Michelle Bacholle-Bošković provides a comprehensive examination of Lê's usage of the letter structure and imagery beginning with her first novel, *Un si tendre vampire*. She notes: "Les lettres abondent dans cette œuvre; elles sont présentes dans tous les textes quoique plus prégnantes dans certains que dans d'autres – principalement dans *Calomnies* et la trilogie. En outre, elles apparaissent sous des formes

diverses: lettre, mais aussi cahier, manuscrit, voire sous forme non-écrite” (Bacholle-Bošković 125).²⁴ In novels where the letter has a specific function in regards to plot such as *Calomnies* and *Les Trois Parques*, the arrival of a letter/cahier functions to provoke a troubled or melancholic response on the part of the characters. In the texts where the structure rather than the plot centers on the letter, the novels that share the form also share many familiar tropes from Lê’s other works. Thus, Lê’s melancholic treatment of the letter is a pattern that indicates a pathological need to repeat pain and trauma that the author associates with missives. In order to trace this pattern, I will focus my discussion in this section on “Vinh L.,” *Calomnies*, and *Les Trois Parques*.

In addition to his insight on narcissism and melancholia, Freud’s examination of the repetition compulsion can contribute to our understanding of the trope in Lê’s works. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud recounts his encounter with Ernst and a game that the one and a half year old child had adapted to play by himself. In this game, Ernst would throw a toy on a string out of his curtained crib and exclaim “o-o-o-o,” an exclamation that Freud believes to have meant “fort” (German for “gone”). After Ernst cried “fort,” he would pull the string and thus have the toy return to him. With the return of the toy from its disappearance, he would happily say “da” (German for “there”). Freud states that Ernst derived pleasure from the game because it

²⁴ In her discussion, Bacholle-Bošković establishes several categories of letter:

Lettre déguisée: a letter that appears in a form other than that of a letter. In various situations in Lê’s texts, letters can also appear as manuscripts or as a notebook; example text: *Calomnies*

Lettre(s) ensevelie(s): a letter that has been physically buried or a letter that actively buries truth and promotes deception; example text: “Anatomie d’une illusion” in *Autres jeux avec le feu*

Lettre ouverte: a letter that simultaneously addresses multiple people through its use of multiple pronouns and names; example text: *Lettre morte*

Lettre vide et lettre anonyme: an envelope that arrives without a letter in it or a letter written entirely in capital letters that contains only insults to the addressee without any indication of its author; example text: the short story “Klara V” in *Les Évangiles du crime*

Lettre régurgitée: a letter that contains repeated instances of plagiarism in which the letter’s author repeated regurgitates the literary works of the addressee throughout the correspondence; example text: the short story “Vinh L.” in *Les Évangiles du crime* (125-137).

reenacted his “great cultural achievement - the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting” (15). Freud thus attributed the fort/da game to Ernst’s attempts to comprehend the periodic departure of his beloved mother. He also briefly mentions the following: “He [Ernst] compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach” (15). Indeed, as he successfully substitutes one love object (his mother) for another (the toy), baby Ernst progresses his passive experience of his mother’s departure to the active experience of the fort/da game; in turn, he comes to discover a means to “control” the situation and to seek vengeance on a substitute for the abandonment (*BPP* 17).

In *Linda Lê, l’écriture du manque*, Michelle Bacholle-Bošković briefly discusses Freud’s story of baby Ernst, his repetitive “fort/da” game, and its possible implications for Lê’s tropes. Bacholle-Bošković states:

Au centre, dérobé dans le prénom international [Linda], le *da*, le *ici* de la fille qui appelle le *là-bas* (*fort*) d’un père toujours absent, éloigné, trop loin, trop tard. Mais ce jeu du *fort* : *da* n’est-il pas pour l’enfant un moyen de se réconcilier avec l’absence de ses parents (de la mère pour le petit Ernst) à un âge où il pénètre le domaine du langage? Pour Lê, le jeu du *fort* : *da* de l’écriture, des lettres a pris le relais du jeu de la mourre et du jeu de la mort, il l’aide à surmonter la mort solitaire – voire le meurtre-abandon – du père et consacre son entrée dans le monde d’autres lettres, celle de la littérature. (158)

In each version of epistolary image and narrative, Lê reenacts the game between the correspondent and his/her ideal correspondent. Bacholle-Bošković attributes the feeling of absence to the actual physical absence of the father when the author is exiled, but the fundamental absence extends from the father and in turn also involves the homeland. This represents the absence of the idealized versions of both rather than the reality of either. The letter writer attempts to correspond with an idealized love object that has been lost through exile. This idealized correspondent has become a part of the letter author’s ego through introjections, and

because of this integration, the correspondent's absence provokes a narcissistic crisis that results in melancholia. As her characters seek to reunite with the lost love object that forms a portion of their ego and represents their past, they are also seeking to reunite with their roots in the lost homeland. While her characters are often emotionally incapable of returning home, the letters can easily make the trip. However, because the letters become the only contact that the characters have with the initial love object, the letters become a love object in their own right. In other words, they become the metonymic stand-in for the cathected object and become cathected objects too. Thus, the chain of love objects becomes infinitely more complicated. Most articles on Lê have examined her obsession with the father trope and have ignored that she has used the letter image and form equally as frequently.²⁵ While she clearly associates the letter with the father, the epistolary construct also appears in texts where the father is not a predominant figure.

Lettre morte represents the climax of Lê's obsessive, melancholic epistolary engagement after she wrote other similar texts prior to 1999. Lê's first significant use of the letter appears in the short story "Vinh L." from her 1992 collection *Les Évangiles du crime*. "Vinh L." recounts the story of a young man who emigrated to France as part of the wave of Vietnamese migration known as the boat people. He tells his story through a series of letters to an author whom he admires. During his voyage from Vietnam to France, Vinh and another man kill and eat one of their fellow male passengers because they were starving. Emphatic that he feels no guilt for this act, Vinh begins writing to the author about it. Yet, Vinh's letters are the product of literary cannibalism mirroring his physical act: he constructs his letters by using plagiarized passages

²⁵ There are several examples of articles and interviews that discuss Lê's use of the father trope: Lê, Linda and Leslie Barnes. "Literature and the Outsider: An Interview with Linda Lê." *World Literature Today*. 82.3 (2008): 53-56; Do, Tess. "From Incest to Exile: Linda Lê and the Incestuous Vietnamese Immigrants." *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations*. Ed. Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005. 165-177; Lay-Chenchabi, Kathryn and Tess Do. "Guilt and Betrayal in the Works of Azouz Begag and Linda Lê." *French Cultural Studies*. 19:1 (2008): 39-56; Loucif, Sabine. "Entretien avec Linda Lê." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*. (September 2009) 13:4, 503-508.

from the author's books. Despite his insistence that he does not feel guilty for eating another human being, his letters seem to function as a confession. As he repetitively refers to and discusses his crime, he also reflects upon the past of his co-conspirator and on his own relationship with his parents. At the story's end, Vinh L. receives a letter from his mother asking him to return to his home country because his father has died.

This short text follows several conventions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century epistolary texts. Rather than launching directly into Vinh L.'s letters, the recipient, the author whom Vinh admired, writes a preface explaining the letters' origin. The author recounts receiving a response to the letter that he had written to respond to Vinh's first missive:

La lettre que je reçus en retour me surprit par son étrangeté: il y disséquait avec tant de froideur sa passion que je le soupçonnai aussitôt d'avoir quelque crime à cacher d'avoir connu dans sa vie un épisode dramatique qui aurait tué en lui le nerf du sentiment. Il me parla de moi comme s'il avait toujours vécu dans mon intimité, analysant les différences qui nous séparaient dans la manière d'aimer les livres. (175)

In his letter, Vinh establishes his connection with the author and fashions himself as an intimate friend. Vinh believes that the author would understand him when no one else would. In this epistolary act, Vinh reaches out to his ideal reader and, in doing so, he is able to affirm himself through this ideal reader's eyes. As ideal correspondent, the author levies criticism against Vinh's efforts:

Les lettres de Vinh L., je les trouvais trop détachées, indécentes à force de s'en tenir à l'apparente rigueur des choses. Je les récrivais. J'en maculai quelques-unes d'un sang trop rouge, j'en enjolivai d'autres, les nourrissant de métaphores incongrues et de comparaisons poétiques. Aussitôt après m'être approprié le crime de Vinh L., je détruisis toutes ses lettres. Pour la première fois, j'assurais mon impunité. On ne pouvait me surprendre dans mon vol. (177)

Finding Vinh's letters to be significantly lacking, the author decides to make changes. By having the writer re-appropriate Vinh's texts, Lê puts the writer in the position of the ego ideal; Vinh's unabated proclamations are thus filtered through the author's eyes, possibly altering or inserting

emotions and guilt that the rewritten letters contain. Through the act of writing the letters, Vinh becomes an author in his own right, even if he has plagiarized much of the letters' contents. In aligning himself with the editor through the written word, Vinh also becomes a double of the author.

Like the letter editors of a former age, the author re-appropriates the letters and introjects them. To introject these letters by re-interpreting them effectively makes them another representation of the author's ego as well as Vinh's – the reader cannot separate the two. At the end of his preface, the author describes: "Les preuves de mon crime effacés, je relus en toute quiétude les lettres dans la nouvelle version avant de les envoyer à la publication" ("Vinh L." 177). Having subsumed Vinh's identity under his own, the character of Vinh becomes Lê's first epistolary double for the narrator. Proceeding from this epistolary text onwards, Lê consistently constructs a narcissistic double of her letter narrators; without this ideal double, like the twins in *Les Trois Parques*, the narrator often loses access to the past and his/her roots.

As the rewritten Vinh begins his letters, he tells the story of his cannibalism. Like the author who has devoured the letters of the double, Vinh believes that he has actually eaten his double: "On croit avoir tué la version réussie de soi. On croit avoir assassiné son semblable, son noble jumeau pour manger sa chair et devenir meilleur" ("Vinh L." 191). For Vinh, consuming this man provides strength and a feeling of power that he has not known before because he is ingesting a superior version of himself. He is ingesting his ego ideal in an effort to join this superior version with his existing ego. In writing to his favorite author, Vinh attempts a similar union with an ideal. As Vinh plagiarizes his letter, he ingests the writing and integrates it into himself as his own authorial voice. While the voyage takes its physical toll on Vinh, he describes feelings of near invincibility after committing his crime; whereas his voyage begins on a

doubtful note as he leaves behind his homeland and his family, he eats someone very similar to him in both race and background and initially feels galvanized. However, other statements in his letters call into question his assertions of power: “J’étais en état de guerre avec moi-même. Le poison avait imprégné mes entrailles. Je cherchais l’instrument qui m’aiderait à extirper cette racine empoisonnée. Je ne pouvais avoir recours ni à la sagesse, ni à la religion, ni à l’oubli, ni à l’inconscience. Ne me restait qu’une seule voie: je me gavai de culture pour me purifier de ma barbarie” (“Vinh L.” 185).²⁶ Vinh insists that he feels no guilt for his actions, but he implies otherwise in the passage; driven to become a cannibal in indescribable conditions, he was at war with himself after the act. Because of this, he feels that he is able to find solace only through reading and writing to the author. However, these two acts actually do not grant him any relief from his act. Rather, he relives it repeatedly in a melancholic cycle. He vacillates from narcissistic proclamations to anguish. Vinh confirms that he writes to the author as a double: “Une fois la déception surmontée, je vous écris comme un pauvre type écrit à un autre pauvre type, c’est-à-dire que je soliloque, je me laisse aller à me regarder bien en face...” (“Vinh L.” 218). At the end of his letters, Vinh tells the author that he has received a letter from his mother telling him of his father’s death.

Through this male protagonist, Lê explores the looming presence of the father and his death for the first time. It is striking that Vinh learns of his father’s death in a letter; from this text forward, the letter constitutes a melancholic space in which Lê and her characters reflect on familial roots at a pronounced distance from the homeland. In contrast with the narrator of *Lettre morte*, Vinh does not express guilt or grief over his father’s death. However, Vinh fills his letters with the uneasy feeling of traumatic exile as he becomes culturally assimilated through studying

²⁶ Consult Michèle Bacholle-Bošković’s *Linda Lê: l’écriture du manqué* for a more detailed discussion of this quotation.

French culture and devouring books in the library. The story's epigraph is a citation from Pier Pasolini that reads: "J'ai tué mon père. J'ai mangé de la chair humaine et je tremble de joie" ("Vinh L." 171). In Vinh's own story, the father features tangentially, but he discusses his fellow cannibal's father at length. The other cannibal's father has a profound influence over Vinh's letters to the author, despite the fact that Vinh does not know the man. As it turns out, the other's man's father was a butcher whom the son had refused to follow into the family business:

Le père cessa de le persécuter. Il n'avait qu'une obsession: que son fils, son unique fils, refusât de lui succéder... Pendant tout le trajet, mon compagnon évoqua le souvenir de ce père. Les premiers jours, il le fit avec horreur, manifestant sa haine du père par le dégoût pour le chair et le sang. Au fil du récit, le compagnon prit de plus en plus plaisir à détailler les scènes où le père découpait la viande... ("Vinh L." 184)

As the co-conspirator starves during the voyage, his opinion of his father's profession shifts significantly. Having initially rejected his father, Vinh's companion is condemned to repeat and compound his father's bloody sins.

In Lê's novel from the following year, *Calomnies*, the letter once again plays a significant role. A letter begins the novel's action. Structurally, *Calomnies* contains two distinct, simultaneous narratives: that of a young woman writer and of her mentally ill uncle. Both narratives, however, are a version of the confessional one-sided epistolary novel with which Lê initially worked in "Vinh L." and once again takes up in *Lettre morte*. The writer sends a letter to the uncle in an effort to discover the identity of her real father. She asks if her father is the man that had cared for her for her entire life or if her father is an American military officer with whom her mother had had an affair.²⁷ The arrival of the young woman's letter disrupts the uncle's relatively simple existence living in one room and working at the library:

²⁷ Marianne Hirsch explains the Freudian concept of the family romance, a concept that Lê explores in the *Calomnies*'s young narrator's search for her origins. Hirsch states: "In Freud's terms, the family romance is an imaginary interrogation of origins, an interrogation which embeds the engenderment of narrative within the experience of family. Through fantasy, the developing individual liberates himself from the constraints of family by

Voilà qu'une lettre vient me rappeler cette famille qui a laminé mon cerveau, tué ma jeunesse, saboté ma vie. Une lettre. La lettre d'une prétentieuse (cela se voit à son écriture grande et large, à ses tournures de phrases, à sa manière d'écrire le français : comme si j'étais capable, moi, moi qui ai appris le français parmi les fous et uniquement pour demander aux infirmiers de ne pas cogner trop fort, de me donner une couverture supplémentaire, comme si j'étais capable, moi, d'apprécier toutes les subtilités de la belle langue française, qu'elle manie comme un apprenti meurtrier manie un couteau de cuisine). (C 9)

Two pages later, he adds: "Cette lettre est arrivée voilà cinq jours et depuis cinq jours j'ai mal à la tête. Je ne lis plus, Je griffonne" (C 12). The letter reconnects the uncle to a past which he would prefer to forget and to a family who mistreated him and had him committed. This letter once again reminds him of his mentally troubled past. It is striking that the text of this letter never appears in the novel, and yet, this letter is the launching point for the novel's exploration of migration and mental illness. For Lê, the letter's text is not important; the letter's existence suffices to create meaning because of the power of the letter in Lê's corpus. However, having received this letter, the uncle once again feels connected to his forgotten niece. He begins to note the similarities between himself and the young writer and states that while he found solace in his mental illness, she finds it in the French language and uses the language as an escape.

Lê alternates chapters between the uncle's perspective and that of a young female protagonist. In the parallel story, the young writer notes that she has written to the uncle rather than to anyone else in her family, because the family sent him away to a mental hospital in France, and he now lives in exile as she does. Like Vinh writes to his ideal correspondent when he writes to the author, the young woman believes that her uncle will more fully understand her question. She describes him: "Le modèle, c'est l'oncle – l'homme libre, l'homme passionné, fils de personne, enfanté par sa folie. L'oncle dont la vie a été sauvée plus broyée, inventée puis

imagining himself to be an orphan or a bastard and his 'real' parents to be more noble than the 'foster' family in which he is growing up" (Hirsch 9). In an exploration of this type, Lê attempts to distance herself from the obsession with the father trope by separating her protagonist from the father she had known and loved. Throughout the course of the novel, the question of the protagonist's origins is never resolved.

détruite par l'amour qu'il portait à sa sœur" (C 87). In turn, the uncle is the mirror through which the young writer believes that she will be able to finally see herself.

While the narrator believes that her uncle is her kindred spirit, his assessments of her are often direct and point to deficiencies in her character. He repeatedly discusses her abandonment of her own culture and language and at times seems almost to be chastising her for this choice. He is thus both the ideal correspondent and the ego ideal. Lê creates a character in her own image in the form of the young female narrator, and the uncle and his commentary constitute the ego ideal's demands which she will never be able to satisfy. The uncle asserts: "Elle s'est défendue de la menace de la folie en se dédoublant. Elle a voulu se rendre étrangère à la famille, puis à son pays, à sa langue natale, enfin à elle-même" (C 128). As the young woman's narrative develops, it becomes increasingly clear that she is having her own problems with mental health; as a person exiled from her homeland, the female narrator searches for her roots in desperation. As many critics have noted, this search encapsulates Lê's own search for roots that runs as a consistent theme throughout her *œuvre*. Having written to the uncle, the young woman gradually descends further into psychic rupture.

As noted earlier, the letter that the uncle receives disturbs him out of his every day existence. Whereas he speaks with clarity in the novel's beginning, he descends into mental illness after this missive. He becomes increasingly drawn to a young woman in a white coat that lives nearby. He repeatedly refers to her as an angel and devotes himself to watching her with near religious fervor. As his madness reveals itself once again, he obsessively observes and follows the young woman. This young woman serves as a double of the niece, and her presence further unsettles the uncle. Near the end of the novel, the uncle rants about the niece:

J'ai glissé dans le sac la lettre et mon cahier avec sa couverture grise, molle. Mon écriture blesse le regard, elle est minuscule, elle griffe le papier, comme si, au lieu d'une

plume, j'avais utilisé une épine dure, sèche. Je relis la lettre. J'ouvre mon cahier. La lettre et le rapport sont écrits en français. *Elle* ne sait plus sa langue natale. Depuis quinze ans, je ne parle plus cette langue. Du Pays, il n'est pas question dans la lettre. Dans mon rapport, il n'y a que quelques allusions. Nous sommes de Nulle Part, *elle* et moi. Je ne rentrerai pas au Pays. Je serai le fou apatride. Là-bas, c'est le pays de la pendue. Là-bas, il y a la tombe de la pendue. Et la mienne. Ici, il y a mon corps qui s'est abandonné lui-même, et ma tête, qui cultive les souvenirs comme des fleurs vénéneuses. Si *elle* a un peu de bon sens, elle comprendra aussi qu'il n'y a pas de retour possible pour elle. Nous sommes de Nulle Part, *elle* et moi. Il faudrait qu'elle se mette ça dans la tête, Qu'elle cesse de croire qu'un jour elle trouvera une famille, une patrie. Le Pays n'as rien à lui donner, depuis que les hommes en noir ont chassé l'Étranger – ils sont les nouveaux pères du Pays. Ces pères-là n'ont que faire d'elle, qui a un prénom international. Ces pères-là n'ont que faire de moi, qui dans la folie ai bâti mon refuge. Nous sommes, *elle* et moi, des âmes errantes. Nos racines sont à fleur d'eau. Elle se cherche un père. J'enlace le fantôme de la pendue. Nous dérivons, dans l'espoir que les eaux nous entraînent vers les origines, mais nous patageons dans le bras mort d'un fleuve, nous brassons toujours les mêmes obsessions, nous charrions toujours les mêmes cadavres. (C 173)

In this long passage, Lê returns to the themes of her wider experience of exile and melancholia.

Having abandoned native language and country, the narrator is no longer able to return to either; being from nowhere, she will never be able to reconcile her confused identities, and neither will her uncle. At the novel's end, the reader discovers that the uncle has died because he did not put out his cigarette before falling asleep, and he caught the library on fire. It is never said whether or not this oversight is a deliberate suicide, but the hopelessness which permeates the uncle's later chapters implies that it is. After his death, the young woman receives a notebook in the mail from the uncle (the notebook to which he alludes in the preceding quotation). As the novel ends, one of the enduring images that the reader takes away is that of the uncle's notebook/letter. Unfortunately, the reader never learns what the uncle has written, and the novel concludes without any resolution as to the young woman's paternity.

Lê's continues her obsessive repetition of the letter and thus her examination of melancholia in 1997's *Les Trois Parques*. This novel is the first work that Lê published after her father's death in Vietnam, and it constitutes the first of three trauma trilogy novels. The father

plays a pivotal role in *Les Trois Parques*. Like *Calomnies*, *Les Trois Parques* is not an epistolary novel, but the appearance and disappearance of letters function as significant plot devices. Thematically, *Les Trois Parques* represents Lê's and her protagonists' profound fixation on the father after his abandonment in Vietnam. This guilt, although present on some level in the two earlier novels that I have discussed, becomes the focal point of Lê's trauma trilogy. The two daughters Ventre Rond and Belles Gambettes do not seem to be overly concerned with the father, le roi Lear. Because they live in France and he lives in Vietnam, their cultural assimilation at times gets in the way of their feeling any concern for him. The novel's periodic narrator, La Manchote, criticizes her cousins, despite being a pariah because of odd behavior and her handicap. These criticisms mirror those that Lê's narrator levies against herself in *Lettre morte*, the trauma trilogy's final work. A passage describing le roi Lear reads: "Il était fatigué, cassé. Il attendait la fin, assis dans sa petite maison bleue, comme le roi Lear dans sa hutte, dépouillé et abandonné par ses filles. Il faut laisser le roi Lear tranquille, avais-je dit à mes deux cousines, qui ne m'écoutaient pas. Elles avaient abandonné le roi Lear dans la petite maison bleue. Elles l'y avaient oublié pendant vingt ans" (*TP* 9).²⁸ While the father had occupied the margins in the first two works discussed, the reader still feels his presence, most specifically in the young woman's quest for roots in *Calomnies*.

Despite the fact that this novel is not an epistolary text, two letters occupy important positions in the novel's plot. The first letter in the sequence of the novel's epistolary exchange is from Ventre Rond to le roi Lear:

Là encore, une lettre est au centre de l'intrigue: l'invitation envoyée au roi Lear par Ventre Rond. Mais cette lettre n'apparaît qu'aux trois-quarts du roman et seulement par les effets qu'elle produit sur le vieillard: "Depuis que la maudite lettre [...] avait court-circuité les synapses du roi Lear, ses neurones crépitaient d'étincelles amoureuses et sa

²⁸ In a striking parallel, the stationary that the father uses is blue like his small house in the homeland. Lê creates another connection between the letter and the homeland through the matching colors.

cervelle ne marchait plus qu'à l'énergie du départ vers l'autre bout du monde" (188).
(Bacholle-Bošković 145)

This letter turns le roi Lear's world upside down and causes him to begin making significant changes to his life in ambivalent preparation for his trip to Europe. The old man realizes the extent to which his life in the homeland is in ruins and wants to appear to be in a better situation than he actually is. In preparation for his arrival in France, Ventre Rond intends to show him all of the luxury that her life provides for her; in effect, she seems to want to show him how superior she is to him. Interestingly, while her invitation to him put his life in upheaval, Ventre Rond cannot find the letter that he wrote as a response. She repeatedly looks in her many cookbooks to find the hiding place to no avail. La Manchote states:

Il n'y avait aucune velléité de reconnaissance discernable dans les réponses du roi Lear à l'invitation de mes cousines. L'aînée en voulait pour preuve la dernière lettre reçue, qu'elle avait serrée dans un des livres de cuisine et qu'elle ne retrouvait plus. Cette maudite lettre. Nichée quelque part. Sûrement à la page des rösti... La lettre n'était pas à la page des rösti. Alors c'est qu'elle avait dû arriver le jour des rognons de mouton. Une sale affaire, restée dans toutes les mémoires. Il avait fallu tout flanquer à la poubelle. La lettre demeurait introuvable. (*TP* 12-13)

Ventre Rond believes that the letter must be in the cookbook next to her European husband's favorite recipe. Portrayed as continually eating throughout the three women's interaction in her kitchen, Ventre Rond's consumption parallels that of Vinh L.'s cannibalism: it demonstrates a pressing need to devour an object. The association of the father's letter with her cookbooks creates a connection between otherwise separate pieces of writing and extends Ventre Rond's irrepressible appetite to include her father's writing and the letter's disappearance. In the context of the novel, she is the only one of the three women who still speaks their native language and thus has served as the translator of le roi Lear's letters. In her translations of his letters, she plays a similar role to that of Vinh's author. She consumes the original letters in the father's language

and then regurgitates the text in the trio's new language. In this sense, as his correspondent and translator, she functions as his double.

IV. Idealized Father and Phantasmatic Vietnam

In the context of Lê's *œuvre*, love between siblings does not constitute the only portrayal of incest. The author extensively examines these sorts of relations between fathers and daughters. The narcissism inherent to the sibling love in *Les Trois Parques* extends to the seemingly incestuous relationship between the father and daughter in *Lettre morte*.²⁹ While none of the descriptions of interaction between the two in *Lettre morte* is as explicit as the scene between the twins, Lê does depict the following: "Il me semblait qu'il m'appelait, que ma main rejoignait la sienne, que dans ma petite morte il était venu près de mon lit, qu'il m'avait regardée comme on regarde une enfant qui a commis une bêtise..." (LM 20-21). Here, the mention of "ma petite mort" creates a meaning that appears to be incestuous; in certain contexts, this phrase connotes orgasmic release. In the narrator's bed and in her father's presence, Lê establishes a sexual connection between the father and the daughter without the physical contact of an actual incestuous act and further reveals the deep connection between the father and the daughter throughout the novel. In another scene nearly twenty pages later, the narrator is once again with her father in the bed:

Je revis le lit où je dormais avec mon père. Sur le lit gisait la poupée en chiffon avec laquelle j'avais joué, enfant. La poupée était devenue grande, elle me ressemblait. Elle se tordait de douleur, comme je le faisais jadis. Je me penchai sur elle, découvris le drap, lui caressai le ventre. Je faisais les mêmes gestes que mon père quand il me trouvait malade, suant et grimaçant au fond du lit. La poupée gémissait. (LM 37)

²⁹ Bacholle-Bošković analyzes the possible incestuous undertones between the daughters and le roi Lear in *Les Trois Parques*. She poses the following thought-provoking question about the letter that Ventre Rond has lost: "Cette lettre oubliée est-elle l'expression d'un refoulement de pensées incestueuses ou au contraire l'expression sincère, sans arrière-pensée, d'un rapprochement avec le père?" (Bacholle-Bošković 149).

With the narrator's allusion to her "petite mort," this scene, which could initially appear to be a dream, takes on a different meaning. Creating a mirror image of her younger self in the form of the doll, the narrator distances herself from the painful experience by replacing herself. The narrator attempts to comfort the doll in the same way that her father had comforted her: by leaning over the doll and stroking her stomach. In light of the earlier interaction between the two, however, the father's caresses seem more than typical fatherly behavior. Whether or not any inappropriate contact occurs, his touch provokes a strong response in the narrator. Because of this strong response, the doll shudders as the narrator touches it. However, this physical interaction indicates a desire to unify the fractured self that is similar to La Manchot's rape and Vinh's cannibalism; rather than the brother and sister, the father is now the narcissistically introjected love object with whom the narrator desperately wishes to unite. Like the brother does for La Manchote, the father represents a return to her roots that became untenable through exile.

Michelle Bacholle-Bošković explains the father-daughter incestuous situation in *Les Trois Parques*: "Si nous appliquons la théorie freudienne du remplacement d'une chose par son contraire, la passion du père pour sa fille se traduirait dans l'œuvre de Lê par la passion de la fille pour le père. Une telle passion est explicite dans les textes et dans un entretien de Lê où elle parle de sa 'vénération' pour son père (Argand 32)" (120). The mild incestuous desire in the *Lettre morte* scenes confirm this assessment; due to the father's early nurturing and care, the narrator became dependent upon him for confirmation of her self, of her continued existence. After her exile to France, the narrator began constructing an image of an idealized father that corresponds with this desire. Rather than disguising the narrator's desire for the father, Lê examines the narrator's feelings: "Ma mère allait, venait, se lamentait de ce qu'elle avait épousé un bon à rien, qui ne faisait que rêvasser et dessiner. J'aurais voulu qu'elle fût morte et que nous fussions, mon

père et moi, seuls dans la maison, moi à me pendre à son cou, lui à me raconter des histoires de princesses prisonnières de dragons” (*LM* 54). As in the Freudian Electra complex, the young narrator wishes that she could displace her mother and become her father’s only focus. In the final lines of this passage, the narrator reverts to an idealized vision of what her life with her father would be like without her mother; in other passages, this idealized version of events corresponds to the idealized portrayal of the father himself. In her attempts to unify her fractured self, the narrator has incestuous feelings similar to those of *La Manchote*, and her love for her father represents a nostalgic desire to return to an idealized past.

Through this implied incest, *Lê* produces a mirrored pairing that demonstrates the circular and connected nature of the familial relationship and its destructive possibilities. As the daughter can no longer separate herself from the father, she cannot survive without him serving as her other half. In her reaction to his death, she proclaims: “C’est une moitié de moi-même qui s’est tue” (*LM* 18). The narrator shows her identification with the father and displays a psychic absorption of the father into the her ego. Several pages later, she continues: “Je vins au monde mais je n’avais pas d’existence, je n’étais que l’enfant de mon père, sa chère enfant, un prolongement de lui-même...” (*LM* 26). Here, the narrator is no longer a separate entity – she merely exists as an extension of him. As an extension of her father, her image of him continues to collapse into her ego, and thus the identification provokes an irrevocable melancholic response. This melancholic response occurs because the love object (the father) with whom she identifies has died and through his death, a part of her ego has also died.

Her nostalgia for the father whom she left behind appears throughout the narrator’s portrayal of him. In their article detailing the guilt and betrayal that *Lê* feels in regards to her father, Kathryn Lay-Chenchabi and Tess Do argue that:

In her interview with Catherine Argand, Lê claims that all her writings are dedicated to one reader, her father (Argand, 1999). The fact that he does not know French, that he writes to Lê only in Vietnamese, and that he lives and dies in Vietnam without ever seeing his daughter again, turn him into a perfect and idealised incarnation of the homeland. The figure of the father, consequently, is invested with loving memories of Lê's childhood, and since the author has never seen her father with the eyes of an adult, his image is blown up into that of an idol... (47)

Because the narrator has lost the father-idol portrayal, melancholia permeates the novel's pages.

While the narrator does eventually introduce non-idealized aspects of her relationship with her father, she returns to the image of the father-idol before the novel's end. Having progressed through a more realistic discussion, the narrator actively works to repress the negative memories again in order to conclude the novel on a falsely positive note.

This incessantly idealized father also plays a striking role in the reader's understanding of Lê and the narrator's respective relationships to Vietnam. As Lay-Chenchabi and Do note, the father-idol becomes the perfect metonymic stand-in for the native country. Moreover, as he becomes the substitution, the narrator also actively idealizes Vietnam after years abroad. Initially, Lê and the narrator cannot fully come to terms with the grief due to traumatic exile and its tendency to transform memories into nostalgic reverie. Lê simultaneously revalorizes and destroys the father and Vietnam. *Lettre morte*'s narrator does not begin to resolve the complicated feelings provoked by the loss of her father until she begins to reexamine her idealized perceptions of him and to portray him as he truly was: a flawed man. Because the romanticized father is an extension of Vietnam, once the narrator begins to confront the repressed memories of her father's imperfections, she is also able to more fully engage with her earlier depictions of the country. However, because of her inability to reconcile the imperfections of the father and the homeland, she moves away from earlier statements and eventually returns to an idealized portrayal. This return implies that Lê intentionally relives the loss of the love object

and also makes a deliberate effort to perpetuate melancholia. Repressing the ambivalence that she feels towards her father, she makes healing an impossibility.

Due to French cultural influence, Lê's nostalgic descriptions of her father and Vietnam often include exotic connotations that seem to exploit the country's foreign-ness. In his seminal critical work *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*, Panivong Norindr extends some of Edward Saïd's ideas in *Orientalism* and examines French historical understanding of Indochina. He states:

“Indochine” is an elaborate fiction, a modern phantasmatic assemblage invented during the heyday of French colonial hegemony in Southeast Asia. It is a myth that has never existed and yet endures in our collective imaginary. As a discursive construction that supported financial and political ambitions, and as a particularly fecund *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) heavily charged with symbolic significance, Indochina continues today to arouse powerful desires. Its luminous aura sustains memories of erotic fantasies and perpetuates exotic adventures of a bygone era, while appealing to the French nostalgia for grandeur. It is my contention that Indochina is a concept at the intersection of myth and phantasm... (Norindr 1)

Norindr expands upon this definition with examples of the constructed image of Indochina in various artistic forms. He emphasizes the idealized vision of Indochina that exists in the French imagination and often cites the nostalgia-inducing images that constitute this vision. This nostalgia represents an oversimplification of the former French colonies that is easier to digest intellectually and at times eschews the brutality of colonial life.³⁰ In Lê's works, she represents Vietnam in a way that shows that her relation to Vietnam is that of an outsider. Her understanding and memory of the country has been overwhelmingly influenced by the French

³⁰ In *Orientalism*, Edward Saïd also argues:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in text – all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf. (20)

Saïd's arguments center on the Middle East rather than Southeast Asia, but his statements here in combination with those of Norindr aid in our understanding of Lê's construction of Vietnam.

construction of the space, and thus, like the authors that Said examines, Lê speaks on behalf of Vietnam and at times represents it as if looking at it through a fog.³¹

Understanding Norindr's description of a phantasmatic Indochina, one can compare the Lê's exotic depictions of her homeland in *Lettre morte*. Phantasmatic Vietnam also contributes to the mythic treatment of the father-idol. Lê's idealized imagery still briefly evokes exotic flora and fauna. Lê's narrator describes: "Mon père, dis-je à Sirius, aimait les choses simples. Les perles de pluie sur une feuille de bananier, le flux et le reflux de la marée, le frémissement du vent dans les arbres, le silence du soir, le contour d'une fleur, l'odeur du tabac" (LM 13). The passage begins with a statement about the father, it quickly continues to evoke vague nature impressions. By actively seeking to depict the father as a man who loved nature and plants, Lê associates the things that he enjoys and the man himself. In this process, Lê's phantasmatic Vietnam takes on an entirely new significance because its idealized state only further reflects the narrator's delusions about her past.

³¹ Norindr's argument analyzing the 1992 film "Indochine" is particularly enlightening in this discussion of an Indochina situated between the mythic and the phantasmatic. Directed by a Frenchman, Régis Wargnier, "Indochine" also stars perhaps the most renowned French actress of the late twentieth century, Catherine Deneuve. This sweepingly epic film, Norindr contends, represents the constructed nature of French knowledge about Indochina. Despite there being substantial information available about the colonial history's truths, Wargnier and the film's writers prefer to present images that have been sanitized. In the following passage, Norindr describes the film's first scene:

The opening shot strikes the viewer in its blank whiteness. The first image of what appears to be white clouds has the ephemeral and insubstantial quality of a dream. The soundtrack features a chanting chorus of unaccompanied voices. The spectator seems to have been transported into a phantasmatic world. The effect is broken when numerous boats filled with Asian officiants dressed in white, mauve, and black emerge from the mist, partially resolving the unintelligibility of the shot. At the same time, the credits begin to roll. The first credit, in white letters, records the movie star, Catherine Deneuve. The sounds and sight of a lone drummer seem to guide this exotic procession of boats. The mystery of this sequence is not fully penetrated until the two cenotaphs which have been laid side by side come into view. The viewer's suspicion that the 'exotic' and enigmatic ritual appertains to a funeral are confirmed by the medium close-up of Deneuve, veiled and dressed in black. (134)

The beauty of these shots invites the audience into a world from which is entirely foreign. Norindr alludes to the exotic ritual which the viewer is being given access; much of the scene's interest for the intended French audience thus lies in its lack of familiarity. This foreign-ness establishes significant distance between the viewer and the people being viewed. Even Catherine Deneuve's character Éliane, while of the same racial background as many Western spectators, is sufficiently "Other" to make her seem exotic. However, despite Éliane's "Otherness," Norindr maintains that her scenes merely rehash the same tired colonial images.

In this passage, the inclusion of the banana leaf adds an air of the foreign to an otherwise vague series of impressions. In the context of the novel, this description appears before the narrator makes her return to Vietnam for her father's funeral; considering that she has not returned to her homeland for decades, her memory of the place could be this vague. Lê is intentionally catering to French impressions of Indochina and is working to support the French construction of the former colonial space because of an inability to do otherwise. Having assimilated to French culture to the point where her understanding of her homeland reflects Western views, Lê's descriptions reflect her inability to remember clearly. However, while her understanding of Vietnam has taken on a French perspective, this idealization also indicates that, like the idealized father, the idealized homeland has also been adopted as a love object.

Her turn to mythic Vietnam also signals a repression that will also affect the father-idol description. Several pages later, the narrator continues: "Toute mon enfance est contenue dans ces lettres écrites pendant les vingt années de séparation. Les mots de ces lettres ont l'odeur poivrée des fleurs que mon père cultivait, l'odeur âcre du tabac qu'il fumait tôt le matin, l'odeur sucrée des confiseries achetées au coin de la rue" (*LM* 15). Like the passage cited on the preceding page, the narrator continues her association of the father with an idealized version of the Vietnamese space. Again, Lê neither mentions specific indigenous flowers, nor any specific sugary Vietnamese treats. Thus, this portrait of life in her home country remains vague, but also attempts to maintain a false exoticism through adjectives such as "poivrée."

The narrator idealizes the physical space and also idealizes her interactions with her father. As Lay-Chenchabi and Do assert, the father becomes an idol for the narrator thanks to the distance that separates them. When discussing the letters from him, she states:

Il commençait toujours ses lettres par Ma chère enfant. C'était la formule magique qui restituait l'enfance, toute la saveur acide du temps où j'étais haute comme trois pommes

et qu'il me caressait les cheveux, me mettait au lit, me soignait quand j'avais la fièvre, me prenait par la main et me décrivait la ville sous la pluie qui s'ouvrait devant moi comme un livre d'images animé de figures animalières... (*LM* 23)

Speaking about her father lovingly, she delineates his caretaking. She is a child in need of a great deal of attention, and her father appears to be eager to attend to her. Kate Averis discusses this nostalgia for childhood and the psychic damage that it reflects: "Lê's novels on the whole reveal a tendency on the part of the author to defer to an idealized past...Lê appears unable to disconnect herself psychologically from her childhood, and in particular her relationship with the father, and eschews a new, mature, adult self which would require a reconciliation..." (Averis 78). Despite the destruction and melancholia that this nostalgia causes, the author and her protagonists make no clear effort to stop the idealization. The narrator continues with this nostalgic reflection on childhood and the father: "L'enfant que j'étais alors avait peu de jouets, pas d'amis. Mon père me tenait lieu de compagnon de jeu. Il fabriquait des cerfs-volants, des lanternes, il dessinait des animaux, il me racontait la vie des oiseaux qu'on ne voyait pas en ville" (*LM* 24). The father's company alleviates the narrator's solitude. The narrator adds: "Mon père, dis-je à Sirius, était né dans une famille de paysans, au milieu d'un jardin peuplé des singes et d'oiseaux. En arrivant en ville, il avait gardé la nostalgie de la nature" (*LM* 24). Because the father was not a cosmopolitan city dweller until later in his exile, his association with nature stems from his nostalgic reflections on his adolescence in the countryside. By having the narrator discuss the father's own exile from his beloved countryside, Lê creates a parallel between the father and the exiled daughter and proves that one can even feel exiled within the borders of one's own country.

Several pages later, the narrator begins portraying the father less positively while she experiences increasing guilt. Although the narrator feels guilty throughout the text, Lê's

placement of this renewed culpability is curious. The narrator laments: “Je l’ai trahi. Je l’ai laissé mourir seul” (*LM* 27). Eventually, the narrator’s nostalgia for a perfect childhood gives way to more negative statements as the repressed memories of her father and homeland begin to emerge. Having written much of the novel in his praise, the narrator’s perhaps more truthful descriptions shows her improved understanding of the father, and she begins to examine her ambivalence towards him. While she stops referring to her negative memories before the novel’s conclusion, she includes them before a shift in the narrative towards her failed relationship with the Frenchman Morgue. She opens her more frank discussion of her father by: “Mon père buvait beaucoup. Je sais que depuis notre séparation, il passait ses nuits à boire seul. Il dormait mal. L’alcool lui faisait oublier sa solitude et mes promesses mensongères. Il avait pris l’habitude de boire depuis qu’il avait fui le Nord, au moment de la partition du pays. Il avait gagné le Sud dans une barque, puis à pied à travers les villages” (*LM* 49). The first sentence of this passage is matter-of-fact and reflects little emotion. The narrator incessantly reproaches herself, but she responds mildly to her father’s excessive drinking. While general psychological opinion demonstrates the destructive effects of alcohol dependency on children and families, she treats this with seeming nonchalance.³² As the narrator reveals, the father began drinking while much younger as he entered exile and continues to drink heavily forty years later. Suffering under exile from his beloved northern countryside in this southern city, the narrator imagines that her father experiences difficulties similar to those of his daughter.

In addition to the father’s alcohol consumption, the narrator also reveals further information about more destructive habits two pages later: “Mon père fumait aussi de l’opium, tôt le matin. Les bouffées lui donnaient des vertiges, il tombait dans la cuisine” (*LM* 51). Like the

³² For more information on substance abuse and families, please consult: Janet Woititz, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*. Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI, 1983.

passage that describes the alcohol, the narrator makes direct statements here that merely recount the father's habits without adding any form of commentary about the effects of his behavior on the narrator. It seems almost as if she once again has no objection to his behavior. In the following pages, she posits possible reasons for his substance abuse, and much of the blame rests on her mother for her constant insults and indifference. In comparison with the kind caretaker presented earlier in the novel, this version of the father portrays him as a man mired in difficulties with a broken spirit. About the man whom she had idolized, she proclaims: "Toute sa vie n'est qu'échec et souffrance. Il cherche l'oubli dans l'alcool et l'opium" (*LM* 51). Like the father and his alcohol and opium, the narrator actively finds solace from failure and suffering through the act of writing and most specifically through writing letters to the father.

Finally, she begins to describe her actions in reaction to her father's difficulties. In two passages three pages apart, she describes the same experience. In the first passage, the narrator provides another departure from the images of the father as provider and caretaker. Rather, she is his caretaker: "Je me souviens des jours où je parcourais la ville, juchée sur ma bicyclette, pour vendre de vieux journaux. L'argent qu'ils rapportaient me permettait d'acheter à mon père des bouteilles d'alcool. Et j'ai oublié tout ça" (*LM* 53). He is neither nursing her through a fever nor is he building her kites as in the fond memories from early in the novel; instead, she takes it upon herself to care for him through his helplessness.

Extending the revelations about the father, the narrator also relinquishes some nostalgic portrayals of the homeland. The descriptions with vague exotic undertones do not appear in these sections. Instead, the narrator focuses on the home that she shared with her father during her childhood. Like the man who continued to live a solitary life there after the departure of his family, the house has fallen into disrepair. When she returns to the house during her trip to her

native country for her father's funeral, she meditates on the destruction around her: "La maison de mon enfance tombait en ruine. L'eau filtrait à travers le toit, les fenêtres se déginguaient, les meubles avaient été vendus" (*LM* 53). She continues this description nearly fifty pages later in significantly more detail:

Je fis le tour de la maison, vis ce qui restait des deux arbres abattus, des fleurs laissées à l'abandon depuis que mon père était entré dans l'hôpital. La maison était presque en ruine, des lézardes striaient les murs, l'eau stagnait dans les égouts derrière la cuisine. Une odeur de fin de vie flottait dans toutes les pièces. La moustiquaire suspendue au-dessus du lit était déchirée par endroits, les draps usés laissaient voir le matelas. (*LM* 100)

In a parallel from the previously mentioned depictions of Vietnam, the narrator evokes both flowers and trees amidst this ruin. Rather than beautiful flowers and trees that conjure up happy memories of her father from her childhood, these abandoned plants point to the absence of her father. This is not the first instance in which Lê has evoked the ruins of her childhood home. As this home has come to represent the father and the narrator's childhood, Lê's portrayal of the utter decay mirrors the relationship with the father. She no longer idealizes him or the physical space with which she associates him. Whereas the narrator often depicts herself as the ruined one, the formerly idealized father now seems to replace her. However, because he represents a narcissistically introjected object and is thus inseparable from her ego, her criticisms of his ruined life extend to her own life. One could initially see this switch as a positive step away from a libidinal attachment to the father/love object, but, as she actively returns to nostalgic recollections by the text's end, she perpetuates her anger with the father. Until the narrator begins her depiction of the father and the homeland, her nostalgia demonstrates that she has repressed the anger at her father and her ambivalence towards him. In order to preserve him as her ideal correspondent, the narrator repressed this rage because her need to receive and write letters while in exile was more pressing than her need for resolution.

Having failed in her relationship with the Frenchman Morgue, the narrator sees her father as the only man with whom she had been able to maintain a close connection. This close connection, while entirely epistolary for her adolescence and adulthood, renders it impossible for the narrator to truly proceed forward after the father's death. Because the narrator cannot resolve the repressed anger, she reverts to this nostalgia. This false nostalgia provides comfort because the narrator has become accustomed to the repressed emotions. For her, healing is impossible because it would turn her world upside down and could limit her ability to write. The narrator writes: "Ce que mon père m'a donné, aucun homme ne me le donnera. Je vivrai éternellement dans la nostalgie de cet amour, la tête posée sur le cœur d'un mort" (*LM* 98). The narrator appears to be prepared to never emerge from her grief. As she states, no other man will ever be able to give her what her father has given her: unconditional love and an epistolary space in which to construct an identity. Without this space, the narrator does not know how to continue. She extends the discussion several pages later and once again addresses her nostalgia: "Je suis en deuil de moi-même, nostalgique de cette enfance que mon père a emportée dans sa tombe. Je suis seule, de cette solitude que connaissent les morts. Mon père m'a abandonnée. Mais ne m'a-t-il abandonnée depuis toujours ? Engendrer, c'est ordonner l'abandon" (*Lettre morte* 104). The narrator remains highly connected to her idealized past, but here, she interprets the guilt about abandoning her father differently. The repetitive melancholic laments from earlier in the novel have shifted, and now the narrator adopts an accepting tone. As she releases herself from the insistence of her abandonment and of her impending punishment, she maintains her discussion of death and solitude. Still nostalgically obsessed with the father and in turn the lost homeland, she is in mourning for the self that she has lost through exile. With the father functioning as the narrator's ego ideal, it does not matter that she finds her childhood home in poor condition;

regardless of its physical state, Vietnam will still represent the past to which she desperately, nostalgically wants to return. Because of this desire to return to a place that has changed beyond recognition, she will never be able to progress through her melancholic response. Lê's letter narratives and essays frequently attempt a homecoming that will never be possible, and thus, her characters engage in never-ending *errance*.

V. *Lettre morte*

The idealized father and phantasmatic Vietnam serve as the narrator's lost love objects, and she attempts to reconnect to both through the letter-writing act. While her "dead letter" receives no response and seems to indicate a therapeutic effort, it only serves to perpetuate her need to self-punish. The letter is thus a masochistic space in which the narrator reaffirms her traumatic exile rather than working through it. In his discussion of Freud, Dominick LaCapra differentiates between the concepts of "working through" and "acting out":

...in post-traumatic acting out...one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back in the past reliving the traumatic scene... Working through is an articulatory practice; to the extent one works through trauma...one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future. (21-22)

Continuing the discussion from the end of the previous section in these terms, the narrator "acts out" her traumatic exile and anger through her fixation on her father's letters, but this fixation prohibits her from "working through" her melancholia. As LaCapra notes, one of the predominant features of this "acting out" is the temporal flux that allows the sufferer to return to traumatic scenes in their past. Connecting this with the repetition compulsion, the sufferer cannot overcome the trauma and is thus stuck in a cycle of melancholia. Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier points out: "Although correspondence represents one of the privileged forms of communication,

it is performed in solitude and symbolizes absence” (248). This absence or lack has an irrevocable effect upon the narrator and her ability to continue after her father dies.

In *Lettre morte*’s opening lines, Lê’s narrator immediately implies that her father, despite his death, continues to pursue her and that his ghost continues to haunt her: “Les morts ne nous lâchent pas, dis-je à mon ami Sirius en rangeant les lettres de mon père dans un tiroir” (*LM* 9). The guilty feelings that she has stemming from her father’s death have not subsided. From this point on, the letters become a trigger for further melancholia. The narrator’s ritualistic use of the letters to connect with the father through memory thus quickly constitutes a regression to a negative state. In a passage several pages later, the narrator describes the repetitive ritual of reading his letters: “J’ai laissé mon père mourir seul. C’était un homme taciturne, et maintenant il parle à travers moi. Il dit sa tristesse, sa rancœur. Je lis ces lettres, les relis, les range, les ressors” (*LM* 10). As she fixates on the letters, she literally embodies the voice of her father: he speaks through her. As the narrator and father become one, the absorption of the lost love object (the father) into the narrator’s ego therefore creates a rupture that allows for her to read and touch her father’s letters obsessively. The narrator begins to reproach herself for not having returned to Vietnam before his death: “J’ai laissé mon père mourir seul” (*LM* 10). This is the narrator’s first direct self-accusation in relationship to her father’s death. Because of the guilt that she feels, the narrator repeats this statement in various forms throughout the novel. Another example of her self-reproach: “Je l’ai trahi. Je l’ai laissé mourir seul” (*LM* 27). She extends the nature of her sins to include betrayal. By contrast, these feelings of betrayal do not stem solely from the fact that she did not return to Vietnam before her father’s death; this betrayal has a profound basis in her choice to remain in France with Morgue and write letters to Morgue rather than visiting her father or responding to his letters. These choices provoke a belief that she is an

unworthy person for having disregarded a man whom she had loved so much. As Freud, argues, the obsessive self-reproach indicates a pathological need on the part of the narrator to castigate herself as an extension of the lost father.

In developing a neurotic attachment to her father's letters, the narrator obsesses over ever smaller units of meaning. By fixating on words, Lê shifts the narrator's letter into a linguistic realm. Lê creates this shift to a language-based nostalgia to extend the father's mirrored relationship with Vietnam to include not only the physical space of the country, but also the linguistic and cultural space. The narrator states:

Mon père, dis-je à Sirius, était avare de mots, même dans ses lettres. Jusqu'à sa mort, je n'étais pas attentive à ses mots. Je lisais ses lettres, mais les mots glissaient sur moi sans laisser de traces. Et maintenant, quand je sors les lettres du tiroir pour les relire, le moindre mot me déchire, le moindre fragment de phrase me donne une douleur fulgurante au ventre. Ces mots qui me parlent d'outre tombe agissent comme des poisons. Ils me brûlent les entrailles. Je les avale, je les dévore. Leur acidité me monte à la gorge. Mais j'aime cela. (*LM* 15)

Once again re-reading the letters, the Vietnamese words used by her father physically pain her. This troubled linguistic encounter after his death further demonstrates that while the father initially appears to be the only trigger for his daughter's melancholic response, it is merely one of many. Her physical reaction to the language occurs after she devours the words and further integrates Vietnam into her ego as an object-cathexis. Rather than seeking to ameliorate her suffering, she confirms its role. In this passage, Lê utilizes terms that indicate a desire to devour, or to take the letters into herself. Like Vinh's author and *Ventre Rond*, the narrator wants to ingest her father's words even though those words have a powerfully negative effect on her. Like the cannibal Vinh, the narrator uses the letter to figuratively poison herself with her father's words and perpetuate the letter as a melancholic space.

In order to continue to explore the letter as an ideal melancholic space, we must discuss one of the novel's most gut-wrenching scenes and its epistolary results. The narrator has a flashback to the day when she departed from her home to follow her mother into exile:

Le lendemain, dans le taxi qui m'emporta, je le vis sur sa bicyclette, hagard. Il voulait suivre le taxi à travers les rues encombrées. Je le revis à un carrefour, il me faisait signe de la main. Puis sa silhouette disparut pour toujours. Oh quelle douleur, Sirius, n'avait-il pas dû éprouver ! La dernière image que je conserve de lui est celle d'un homme en chemise bleue qui, sur sa bicyclette, tentait de rattraper un taxi et pédalait, pédalait désespérément, pour retenir, quoi ? Toute sa vie s'en allait. (*LM* 55)

The narrator here is much more specific than in the other passages describing her childhood; in these other passages, she depicts vague impressions and sensations rather than scenes so specific that they mention the color of the father's shirt. The shirt is blue and thus parallels le roi Lear's little blue house from *Les Trois Parques*. While the narrator often repeats images, this departure scene appears only once in the text. Like the negative memories relating to the father's substance abuse, the clear memories in this passage emerge only as the narrator begins to remember and reveal a truer version of her life in Vietnam. As she departs, she concerns herself more with her father's desperation at losing his family than with her desperation at losing him. Displacing any negative feelings on to him in this context, she removes herself from any emotional response to this difficult scene. However, because of the narrator's extensive laments about her father after his death, the reader understands the traumatic nature of this separation.

After the image of the blue-shirted father on his bicycle, the narrator proceeds into an account of her first epistolary relationship. About writing to her father, she recalls:

Je me souviens que mes premières lettres étaient baignées de larmes. Puis les années passèrent et les lettres se firent plus banales, je n'étais plus l'adolescente que l'arrachement au père déchirait. Il adopta le même ton... Mais il y avait sous chacun de ses mots comme l'écho d'une peine, la trace d'une larme ravalée. Chacune des lettres formées disait une douleur. Le L ruisselait de pleurs, le O étouffait un cri, le C répandait une clarté de lune morbide, le S rappelait la forme du pays de mon enfance, le I tremblant

était l'image de mon père, un homme qui essayait de se tenir droit mais qui était près de s'écrouler. (*LM* 56)

As before, the narrator displaces much of the suffering through this correspondence to her father. By contrast, she initially is extremely upset by his absence, but eventually, she becomes less emotional about the separation. However, the tear-soaked letters follow the narrator into her experience of melancholia.

Moving from dejection to detachment, the narrator represses the early trauma of the separation. She becomes increasingly assimilated to her new culture and moves farther away from her father, his letters, and the homeland that she describes in this passage. Repressing the pain that she feels as an adolescent, she nevertheless associates the suffering of her first days in exile with the letters that she received. After the father's death, these letters represent his presence just as they had done in the years that the two had been separated. They also transform into the central image of the narrator's melancholia and mental illness. As she attempts suicide as a solution to her guilt, the narrator once again takes out the letters so that they can feature in her death scene: "Je voulais voir les gouttes de mon sang tomber sur une de ses lettres que j'avais sorties de leur tiroir et déposées près de moi sur le lit" (*LM* 20). Having convinced herself that she deserves this punishment and that her father would punish her if he were still living, she injures herself as an expression of her worsening melancholia.

As mentioned before, this melancholia is not solely the result of the father's death, and the reader should not only connect the melancholia to his letters. While she does attempt to kill herself and bleeds on her father's letters, the narrator first encounters epistolary destruction through her interactions with her ex-lover. Her relationship with him even affects her letters to her father. The epistolary relationship that she has maintained with her father has enabled her to maintain a connection with her homeland and to establish a semi-stable sense of herself. It is

problematic then when her communication with her father is stymied by her miserable relationship. She explains her attempts to avoid the topic in the letters to her father: “Je taisais les choses de ma vie, ne racontais pas mes amours, le dernier amour qui m’avait jetée à terre, m’avait fait oublier son existence, négliger ses lettres. Je ne lui avais pas parlé de ces longues heures passées à attendre qu’à part moi je surnommais Morgue, parce que en lui mouraient toutes mes illusions, parce que avec lui j’avais rencontré la destruction” (*LM* 19). In becoming involved with Morgue, she abandons her epistolary relationship with her father in favor of Morgue’s abuse and neglect. Rather than maintaining the connection to the father and Vietnamese culture, she pursues Morgue and inevitably finds her own destruction. This tendency towards self-annihilation through Morgue parallels her attempts at self-annihilation through suicide.

As she continues her liaison with Morgue, she mentions her father’s letters and uses her missed opportunities to respond as proof of her obsession with Morgue. In the final days of the relationship, she describes her mental state: “J’avais presque perdu la raison en le perdant. J’avais cessé d’écrire à mon père. J’écrivais à Morgue des lettres où l’orgueilleuse Solitude disait sa détresse, j’écrivais comme une mendiante d’amour qui étrennait des mots de douleur qu’elle croyait neufs” (*LM* 19). This passage marks another shift in the narrator’s epistolary experience. From her tear-stained letters to the nonchalance of adolescence, she does not allude to having any emotional difficulties caused by writing to her father as an adult; however, her troubles start once again when she writes to Morgue. In this passage, the narrator’s pain at Morgue’s absence mimics the Portuguese Nun’s struggles with melancholia after she loses her lover. In this sense, Lê inscribes her narrator in an established epistolary tradition of the abandoned female lover. However, Lê complicates the trope because the narrator is not only obsessed with Morgue’s letters, but also with those of the father. Because the narrator clearly associates the father and his

letters with the homeland, Morgue and his destructive correspondence represent the narrator's relationship with France. She stays in France, a country that seems to reject her and refuses to return to Vietnam because she subconsciously fears what she will find there.

However, the narrator's feelings about Morgue's letters differ wildly from her feelings about her father's letters. Whereas she obsessively treasures the father's letters, she destroys Morgue's: "Après chacun de ses départs, je sortais du tiroir une de ses photos ou une de ses lettres que je déchirais en morceaux, comme il suffisait de détruire les preuves matérielles d'un attachement pour en être quitte avec la douleur" (LM 39). As she works to detach herself from the relationship, she tears apart the letters and no longer fixates on Morgue's letters. The choice to destroy the letters demarcates the next step in the narrator's emotional response culminating in melancholia. In contrast with her father's letters to which her self-concept is tied, she feels a release from her suffering when she tears up Morgue's missives; the narrator experiences significant relief from Morgue's rejection and emotional abuse through her act of destruction.

Her relationship with Morgue ends, and shortly afterwards, her father dies. She becomes emotionally disturbed when she no longer has the opportunity to write because so much of her attempt to gain control over her experience of exile has been tied to her correspondence. Thus, she begins her *lettre morte* in response to this. While the reader associates the narrator's melancholia with the image of the father and Morgue's letters, it is striking that the space in which the narrator explores this neurosis is by all accounts itself also a letter. In her discussion of the letter in its many manifestations throughout Lê's works, Bacholle-Bošković describes *Lettre morte*:

Un autre genre de lettre que l'on peut discerner dans les textes de Lê est celui de la lettre ouverte; par "ouverte" s'entend non pas la lettre adressée à un destinataire unique mais exposée à la connaissance de tous, mais plutôt "lettre ouverte" dans le sens où elle a

plusieurs destinataires...Comme dans *Lettre morte*, le narrateur homodiégétique s'adresse à un "tu" ou un "vous." (130)

This classification confirms the novel's epistolary function; whereas Lê's text could appear to be a typical first-person narrative due to its total lack of epistolary markers and the sliding addresses to and about Sirius, it is in fact a letter. Rather than duplicating the epistolary narrative form as it existed in its heyday, Lê changes it to suit her needs. *Lettre morte* is a dead letter, a diary, and a monologue. Lê proclaims the novel to be a letter in the title, but she almost entirely ignores convention in an effort to have her narrator address not only the father, but also Morgue, her friend Sirius, and herself. In this form, the narrator attempts to write a document that unifies the ruptured pieces of the self/ego by addressing characters who represent different parts. In addressing Morgue and Sirius, the narrator speaks to the French self with which she struggles, and as she addresses her father, she continues her connection to her Vietnamese self. These two selves are in conflict with one another, and each comes to the forefront of the text at different times.

In his discussion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud questions why the child Ernst would continue to engage in the repetitive action of the fort/da game despite the fact that it reenacts significant pain when the object disappears in addition to the pleasure when the object returns. Freud also extends this line of questioning to its implications for obsessional neurotics, who often engage in repetitive actions to their own detriment. Freud also analyzes the role of repression in repetition:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past. (*BPP* 18)

Thus, in the context of *Lettre morte*, the repetitive return to the letter and to the deceased father's image stems from a repressed memory that involves the father. The narrator continues to fixate on the letters, and she once again alludes to her obsessive readings of them: "Je lis et relis ces mots qui désormais appartiennent à un mort. N'est-ce pas toi, dis-je à Sirius, qui prétendais que nous avons beau chercher notre enfance, nous ne trouvons qu'un vide béant ? Ce trou devant lequel je me tiens, c'est la tombe de mon père, d'où sort la voix de mon enfance. La tombe de mon père est faite de papier" (LM 15). As she obsessively engages with the letters, she experiences nothingness when faced with her father's death; this nothingness links directly to the narrator's childhood – a period which she describes fondly elsewhere. She repeatedly reads the father's letter to reconnect to her childhood, but she encounters only silence and a reminder of her father's death. However, this nothingness that she depicts and the repetitive nature of her reading actions indicates repression or an unwillingness to remember certain traumatic events of her childhood.

Within the latter third of the novel, Lê's use of epistolary imagery largely stops. In the novel's closing pages, the narrator makes an abrupt shift from lamenting guiltily about her father's death. She states in a hopeful tone:

La mort de mon père signifiera-t-elle ma mort ou une seconde naissance ? Si les morts ne nous lâchent pas, n'est-ce pas pour mieux nous accompagner vers la vie ? Mon cœur tressaille, pour la première fois depuis longtemps. Il me semble que des lettres de mon père ne montent plus la voix des reproches, mais un appel pour que je tourne les yeux vers la lumière. La mort est dans cette chambre, mais il n'est pas là pour me tourmenter. (LM 105)

This statement seems to contradict my argument about the narrator and the author's respective melancholic experiences. The narrator clearly shows that she has begun the difficult process of mourning her father's death and appears to have found solace in the composition of this *lettre morte*. Indeed, Anne Cousseau argues: "...la parole paraît renaître à elle-même, progressivement,

dans *Lettre morte*. Se déployant en un mouvement plus fluide, elle semble avoir trouvé dans les mots du père où se placer, se poser. La parole paternelle n'est plus un lieu mortifère, mais peu à peu un lieu fécond d'où écrire" (203). Thus, while the letter has represented the ideal melancholic space for both the narrator and her author until the novel's conclusion, Cousseau's characterization in the quoted passage implies that the narrator has come to terms with the devastating effects of her father's death and now finds comfort in her father's letters. Contrasting with Lê's other dark and shadowy images, the narrator now openly speaks about turning towards the light. The narrator's unexpected change in attitude is further suggested in the novel's final sentence: "Le jour se lève, Sirius. Ouvre donc cette fenêtre. Laisse pénétrer la fraîcheur de l'aube" (*Lettre morte* 105). As she begins to view the death of her father as an opportunity for a second birth, she rejects the melancholic space that she has created in the image of letters. Instead of the guilt-inducing accusations that she has compulsively read, she now views his letters as a space of self-realization.

However, because these optimistic affirmations appear on the novel's last page, the narrator does not elaborate on them. Lê's use of her trauma trilogy to work through the death of her father appears to have been a success if the reader views the narrator's affirmations as a true representation of Lê's psyche. Having progressed from the distant and disjointed third person narrative of *Les Trois Parques* to the hallucinatory journal of *Voix: une crise*, Lê looks as if she has resolved her grief in the final pages of *Lettre morte*. And yet, this redemptive tone does not continue in Lê's more recent works.

While Lê attempts to shrug off the narrator's melancholia and move forward in these final lines, she also makes another statement that more accurately reflects the author's mentality

upon finishing the novel. The narrator bluntly tells Sirius: “Je dois m’en aller” (*LM* 105)³³.

Martine Delvaux provides a more pointed commentary about this repetitive tendency of departure: “Lê’s narrators always leave, but they never reach the end of their journey, for writing, like madness, is an eternal migration entailing countless departures without arrivals, travels that never really lead to a destination or bring them back to their point of origin” (209). Lê’s narrators’ persistent need to leave relates directly to our discussion of the letter and melancholia; while *Lettre morte*’s narrator puts a positive spin on her father’s letters, her need for continued *errance* implies a continued connection with the movement associated with letters. The narrator refers to her wandering several times before this in the text. She continually wanders without a purpose in Paris due to her troubles with Morgue. Because she is so profoundly lost in her exile, she cannot remain in a fixed place: “Mais je n’allai nulle part, j’étais une prisonnière de ma chambre, prisonnière de Morgue. J’errais dans l’appartement, je serrais dans mon poing une gale que Morgue m’avait donné, je répétais des phrases incohérents, je regardais dans la glace mon visage bouffi, mes yeux gonflés d’avoir trop pleuré. J’étais défigurée par la douleur. Je glissais dans la folie” (*LM* 62). In this passage, the narrator simultaneously is a prisoner of her apartment and a wanderer within it. Trapped in her apartment in an inhospitable city, she enacts her exile through this *errance*; her wandering transforms into her obsession with epistolary movement. Letters by their very nature move through time and place before reaching their final destination, and this fact constitutes one reason for the epistolary novel’s continued appeal for contemporary authors. Importantly, they always do have a definitive destination; unlike a wanderer, they will not go anywhere for the sole purpose of moving. However, this novel is a *lettre morte*, taken from the expression *rester lettre morte* meaning to receive no

³³ This insistence on departure is reminiscent of the young female narrator in *Calomnies*, and her similar desire for *errance*, a desire that she notes by stating: “Je m’en vais” (181).

response or to be ignored. Without a response, Lê's text does not fulfill the traditional epistolary pact. In fact, due to certain narrative choices that the author made, the letter could not ever reach its destination – in fact, the letter has no addressee. Practically speaking, without an indicated correspondent, the letter is like the wandering narrator trapped in the apartment; the movement has no resolution within the text, and the novel itself continues the letter's movement through publication and into the hands of the literary public. From this perspective, the novel's conclusion is less hopeful than the reader may first assume. Lê specifically uses the light imagery in the final lines to give the appearance of having successfully mourned the father. But, as I have argued, her melancholia has its basis in earlier experiences stemming from traumatic exile. Lê's thematic *errance* engenders this exile and speaks to the depth of the damage that the author's self has sustained since her departure from her father and homeland.

VI. Letter Image in Texts After *Lettre morte*

I would like to examine Lê's usage of the epistolary form in an additional works after *Lettre morte*: the short story "Anatomie d'une illusion" from 2002's *Autres jeux avec le feu*. While certain critics have argued that Lê resolves her melancholic writing by the end of *Lettre morte*, I contend that her continued use of the letter form indicates that she continues to struggle. Thematically, once again, Lê engages in the repetitive portrayal of problematic images and thus implies that she has not resolved the pathological need to repeat these images. Like baby Ernst in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, she repetitively returns to the letter despite the fact that the pleasure that she derives from using the trope also comes hand in hand with psychic pain.

The short story "Anatomie d'une illusion" provides an striking counterpoint to the father image presented in the trauma trilogy. "Anatomie d'une illusion" uses the epistolary form as a response to the "dead letter" that Lê's narrator wrote to her ideal reader, her father. In this later

vignette, a father responds to a letter written to him by one of his daughter's friends whom he had met while the friend was a tourist in Vietnam. The friend has written to him to ask him to be truthful with his daughter because the image of him that she had presented to the friend does not match the one which he found when he met the father in person. Having waited six months to reply, the father admits that he was not sure what to say in response because of the difference between the reality of the situation and the fiction that the daughter had created: "La vérité est que je ressemble très peu au personnage imaginaire que ma fille, votre amie, vous a décrit et qu'elle a élaboré au fil des ans pour réparer l'absence. Savez-vous, personne maintenant ne se doute que j'ai une fille, ni qu'elle est partie avec sa mère en France il y a dix-sept ans. Tout le monde me croit célibataire" ("Anatomie" 121). The father has allowed the daughter to think of him as being destroyed by having been left behind in Vietnam. However, he notes that this is not the truth; rather than lamenting the departure of his daughter years ago, the man lives as if he did not have a family in the first place. He contrasts his self-image with the image that his daughter has of him: "Ma fille vous a présenté ce changement précipité de domicile comme une fuite en avant. C'eût été trop douloureux pour moi de vivre dans une maison dont chaque meuble, chaque recoin était un rappel du passé. Longtemps, j'ai cru cela aussi. Et j'ai laissé croire à ma fille. Je m'étais coulé dans le rôle de l'esseulé, de l'abandonné" ("Anatomie" 121-122). Playing into the role that his daughter ascribes to him, he continues lying to her about his emotional state. She believes that he began moving after her immigration because the home and its associations were too painful and that his *errance* is the only way for him to reconcile the trauma of his loss. In his continued need to wander the father mirrors *Lettre morte*'s narrator. Lê develops the father character in this other seemingly one-sided letter exchange (the reader never sees the friend's letter), and she creates several connections between the father/narrator and the daughter/narrator

that only further establishes L  's extensive *mise en ab  me* of identity. The father's letter constitutes a response to the narrator's "dead letter" in *Lettre morte*, and it seems as if the daughter projects her rootlessness on her father. Because the separation from the father was part of her traumatic experience of exile, the daughter believes her father to be equally traumatized. She has not recovered while he has gone on with his life.

After the family's departure, the father admits that he thought the same: "D'un accord tacite, nous pensions tous deux que mes d  m  nements incessants prouvaient mon insatisfaction et mon instabilit   int  rieure. J'avais perdu mes racines, j'  tais devenu un homme errant... On m'avait enlev   mon enfant et mes biens. On me chassait de partout. On avait fait de moi un mort-vivant" ("Anatomie" 122). In this passage, the father allows the daughter to attribute feelings of rootlessness to him; while he seems to have been perfectly content to wander as he has, the daughter believes that he wanders because he is miserable after losing his home and family.

Thus, he has preserved a lie in order to support his daughter in her exile. As he tells her friend about the letters that the daughter has written to him, the father notes the daughter's need to maintain the mythology that she has created about him:

Les lettres de ma fille me confortaient dans cette certitude. Elle me voyait comme un homme bafou  , un h  ros triste, d  pouill   de tout, hormis dans la douleur. C'est ainsi que s'exprimait son amour. Le mien ne pouvait se traduire que par une conformit      cette image. Me croit d  sesp  r  , en deuil du pass  ,   tait devenu pour elle une religion. Elle se disait coupable de m'avoir plant   l   et elle trouvait dans cette culpabilit   un certain apaisement. L'en priver, c'  t  t   de la tuer. ("Anatomie" 122)

In his absence, she has begun worshipping his image as if it were a religious icon. However, following my analysis of the idealized father in *Lettre morte*, the father's portrayal of the daughter as long-suffering could be his idealized form of her. Just as he has falsified this fantasy

of his suffering, she may also be falsifying hers. In each case, the idealized version of the other constitutes repression that impedes an understanding of the situations' reality.

The father continues by discussing how he became worshipped as a hero; the daughter has set him up as the antithesis of her mother, with whom she has a contentious relationship: "Mon absence me paraît de toutes les vertus. Elle n'avait en face d'elle que sa mère, qu'elle pouvait haïr de toutes ses forces. Elle mit toute son énergie dans cette haine. La haine, si elle est contrebalancée par un amour imaginaire, est un puissant moteur d'action" ("Anatomie" 128). Playing along with this imaginary love, the father encourages his daughter to think of him as a poor, suffering soul: "Il fallait seulement que je n'oublie pas ma position de victime. Je rappelais dans chaque lettre que le mariage m'avait démolì, que mon lâchage m'avait tué" ("Anatomie" 128). Through the letters that she writes to him, he realizes that she has a pressing need for this idealized vision in order to continue living. Without this imaginary father, he is unsure how his daughter would cope. In turn, he begs his daughter's friend to help him maintain his secrets by clarifying that his daughter does not want to know the truth. The father states why she did not also come along on the voyage to Vietnam with the friend: "Comme chacun d'entre nous, tout en demandant à être dupée, elle devine confusément la vérité, c'est pourquoi elle n'a jamais voulu revenir ici, de peur d'être confrontée à la réalité" ("Anatomie" 133). Wanting to maintain the fiction of the father that she had so painstakingly constructed, she refuses to accept an alternate reality. Upon the friend's return, the father projects what he believes his daughter's reaction would be to stories of the trip and of the real father that he met while traveling. Because this image of the father does not match that which she has created in reading his letters, she stops talking about the trip: "Elle a cessé de vous questionner et elle a continué comme avant à vous raconter le roman du père abandonné" ("Anatomie" 134). In this short story, the author levies

some significant criticism against the daughter who continues to exist with her illusions. However, while the daughter's refusal to believe the truth could be seen as deluded, Lê seems to understand that this ideal father represents a formative fiction upon which the daughter bases her self-concept. Simultaneously, this construct makes it impossible for her to effectively live her own life. The presence of the hero father once again represents the ego ideal for the daughter: an ideal to which her ego is inextricably attached. Thus, despite the nonsensical nature of her attachment to this fiction, she maintains an unwilling connection. Seeing herself as a manifestation of this wandering, suffering father in Western Europe, the daughter perpetuates her own melancholia by refusing to find another more suitable love object. Lê's narrative situation becomes infinitely more complicated once one considers that the daughter is not the only person engaging in this *folie à deux*; the father is equally unable to give her up as she is to give him up. He is also entirely unwilling to relinquish the idealized version of himself that he sees reflected back to him in the daughter's letters.

This short story marks Lê's final engagement with this more autobiographical version of the father image in an epistolary text. Creating his hypothetical response to *Lettre morte*, she appears to have resolved her fixation with him that began in her works over ten years earlier. In "Anatomie d'illusion," the new vision of the father as a fulfilled man shows a progression in the concept that she had developed. Throughout the earlier texts that we have examined in this chapter, the father was a failed artist and a man with seemingly no agency. At first examination, it appears that Lê engenders a melancholic response to the father through these images. Thus, as she appears to work through this response by writing both *Lettre morte* and "Anatomie d'une illusion," the reader would assume that Lê's need to repeat the epistolary structure and the theme

of incest would stop as she resolves her difficulties because these are two aspects of her texts that she has closely linked to the father.

As one can readily see, Lê's melancholic experience is by no means limited to her texts in which the father plays a major role. Rather, this melancholia centers on the letter narratives that the author has so frequently used. Because the letter represents transnational border crossing for Lê, it becomes the ideal image for her traumatic experience of exile. Through the repetition of the epistle, Lê does not work through her trauma as some critics have argued. Rather, she perpetuates it and uses her epistolarity to continue acting out her struggles with no capacity to find resolution.

CHAPTER 3: *UNE FORME DE VIE*

I. Introduction

Having examined melancholic epistolarity in earlier contexts, I will now explore the most recent novel of the group, Amélie Nothomb's 2010 *Une forme de vie*. Three voices emerge in *Une forme de vie*: that of Melvin Mapple (an American soldier) and those of two fictionalized Amélie Nothombs. The first of the Améliés engages in an epistolary exchange with Melvin while the second performs metadiscursive commentary about Melvin's letters. Correspondent Amélie reveals little in her letters to Melvin whereas commentator Amélie is an open book. In the commentary, Amélie sets forth her own theories of epistolarity using Melvin and his letters as examples. She also alludes to her letter writing history and to various literary texts in support of her claims that she is an expert in the letter genre. Thus, this metadiscourse provides in-text commentary about the epistolary genre; in these sections under the guise of the fictionalized Amélie, Nothomb directly addresses the act of letter-writing and its influence upon her as an author.

At first reading, *Une forme de vie* appears to be the most traditional epistolary text of the three. Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* contains a section of the narrator's letters, but it also has a significant first-person narrative outside of those letters. In addition, the novel's other letters come in the form of Man Ya's prayers or oral "letters" to God. Lê's *Lettre morte* lacks epistolary markers and has no chapter or letter divisions; instead, it reads like an interior monologue or a journal. By contrast, Nothomb's novel appears straightforward because it contains letters between two correspondents, but as I will demonstrate in this chapter, such a view overly simplifies Nothomb's complex use of the epistolary form.

As we come to the final chapter of this project, our author's experience of pathology differs significantly from the first two; while Pineau and Lê's protagonists suffer profoundly as the result of their traumatic exile, Nothomb's characters seem instead to revel in their pathology through humor and sarcasm. However, although Nothomb eschews Lê's depressive tendencies, her protagonists are melancholic in a different way: that of mania. At times, Nothomb herself appears to mirror her characters in this pathological response. In the image that she has actively created in the media, Nothomb attempts to seem excentric, but this excentricity also provokes questions about the author's intent. In a 2006 article by Christina Patterson that appeared in the British paper *The Independent*, the journalist describes the following scene:

Amélie Nothomb is hungry, but she doesn't want to eat. Since rising at four this morning, as usual, she has made the journey from her flat in Paris to this members' club in Soho fuelled only by gallons of black tea. She is sipping some when I arrive - a slight, gamine figure dressed entirely in black, but with blue striped tights like candy. Her pale face looms out from a huge black hat a bit like the Mad Hatter's. "I need to be very hungry all the time," she declares in a charming French accent. "I need to be very hungry to write." (Patterson Paragraph 2)

Similar descriptions appear in several Nothomb interviews; the author has engineered a "look" that is a caricature. Using this constructed image, Nothomb creates distance between her inner self, her interviewer, and the reading public. She behaves as if she is being entirely transparent by granting journalists a glimpse into her life, but this transparency allows a glimpse into a series of defensive lies. Adding to this interview image, Nothomb struggles throughout her texts to re-work her own autobiography. While Lê repeats images and scenes with the father in a very focused manner, Nothomb fictionalizes most of her existence. A sense of hopelessness permeates Nothomb's extensive collection of novels despite her masks of humor and whimsy. Replete with self-destructive, mentally ill characters, Nothomb's works comprise a vicious cycle in which she obsessively revisits images that pertain to the body, the act of writing, and national identity.

Nothomb's repetition compulsion relies on the juxtaposition of the grotesque and sublime body. Thus, in works like *Hygiène de l'assassin* and *Attentat*, Nothomb portrays a physically deficient male character and a lithe, beautiful female character. As in Lê's use of incestuous relationships, Nothomb's paired disgusting/attractive characters also become mirror images of each other. Nothomb's narratives (like those of Lê) push for the unification of these characters through often sadistic acts which seek to manifest control over the other. These attempts at control align themselves with underlying psychic difficulties. Of these difficulties, the fictionalized Amélie's narcissism becomes one of the most important factors in examining melancholic manifestations and mania in *Une forme de vie*.

The child of a Belgian diplomat, Nothomb spent her childhood and adolescence at her father's posts in Japan, China, New York, Bangladesh, Burma, and Laos. Although she is a Belgian citizen, she did not spend significant time in her "home" country until she began courses at the Université libre de Bruxelles at seventeen. Due to the time that she spent in Japan and her close relationship with her Japanese nanny, Nothomb spent much of her childhood a confused bilingual speaker of French and Japanese, a convergence of the East and West. This confusion led Nothomb to return to Japan to work after finishing her studies in Brussels. However, she has since returned to Europe, where she currently lives. Despite now living in France, Nothomb's writing still echoes her feelings of exile; she desperately wants to return to the Japan of her childhood. Unable to establish feelings of cultural belonging, Nothomb experiences a self-rupture, and thus, she consistently attempts to recapture the period of stability that she experienced as a child before this "rupture" of self that began when she was a young teenager. In the reenactments of the author's life that she publishes periodically, she manufactures a sense of agency otherwise lacking in her life; having spent her formative years at the mercy of the whims

of the diplomatic community, Nothomb attempts to control the various phases of her life by creating a re-imagined autobiography.

Indeed, even in novels that initially appear to be entirely fictional, Nothomb creates versions of herself in her protagonists. While some may view these fictionalized Amélie's as characters distinct from one another, I view them as versions of the same character that appear in several narratives. In an interview discussing her first novel *Hygiène de l'assassin*, Nothomb provocatively claims: "Pour être bien claire, Tach [personnage principal de *Hygiène de l'assassin*], c'est moi. Je suis déguisée en mon contraire, en vieux bonhomme obèse, très célèbre et mourant, pour dire tout ce que je pensais" (cited in Jaccomard 85). Thus, even the characters who are not named Amélie can represent a redefinition of self in Nothomb's works. This redefinition often involves characters pushed to the extreme: grotesque obesity, ugliness, and violence. Taking *Hygiène de l'assassin*'s protagonist Tach as an example, he murders his cousin as an adolescent and then is murdered himself. This cycle of violent encounters indicates Nothomb's dark sense of humor, but it also demonstrates a certain playful pathology. If characters such as these represent Nothomb, why does she destroy them? While many critics have noted Nothomb's desire to play narrative games in her characters' violent ends, this is not game playing but instead demonstrates an obsessive need to destroy the self that she constructs in her texts. After this destruction, she has an excuse to continue her writing and to avoid resolving the problems that cause her to write. Nothomb has publicly referred to writing as a pathology, and, thus confirms that she writes to perpetuate her own suffering. In turn, she repeatedly punishes her characters and by extension herself in an attempt to control both the fictional and actual worlds.

Unlike Lê, for whom the letter image is a point of melancholic departure in her attempts to control and understand her past, Nothomb does not repeatedly engage with epistolarity. However, in her 2010 novel *Une forme de vie*, Nothomb utilizes the letter form to once again explore her obsession with the grotesque body and with her development as an artist. As one examines Nothomb's tendency to pair characters and create dialogue, it is surprising that this is her first epistolary endeavor. At the beginning of the novel's exchange, Melvin tells Amélie that he is writing to her because he is suffering and believes that she is the only person who would understand. Intrigued, Amélie responds by sending a package of her novels in English. From this point, a tentative friendship develops between the two. Amélie repeatedly requests additional information about Melvin's life in Iraq; in turn, she becomes his confidant when he begins recounting his daily struggle. He tells her that he has been deployed for six years. Because of his distaste for his experience, he revolts against his role in the war and demonstrates this revolt by over-eating and becoming obese. He is simultaneously repulsed by his weight and obsessed with gaining more; he describes his girth and decides that the weight around his stomach is his lover and names it Schéhérazade. He develops an imaginary relationship with Schéhérazade; already fascinated with him because of his obesity, his new stories enthrall Amélie. Schéhérazade becomes the touching point for the rest of the correspondence.

The two continue to write as Amélie travels periodically between Paris and Brussels, and Amélie eventually proposes that Melvin turn his rebellious obesity into a photography project, and he begins referring to his weight as his work of art. Amélie is initially offended that he considers his excess weight to be a work of art like her novels are works of art, but she eventually decides to help Melvin out of pity and her need to be needed by him. She even goes as far as finding a gallery in which to display his "art" after he sends a photograph. However,

Melvin eventually stops writing without warning. Amélie takes this as a stride because it has happened before with people to whom she wrote regularly, but after not hearing from him for several months, she begins to search for him. She cannot find a listing for an American soldier named Melvin Mapple in Iraq, but she does find a Howard Mapple. She writes to Howard for more information and receives a bluntly worded response in which Howard states that he is not Melvin and that she should write to Melvin in Baltimore. Assuming that he has finally been allowed to return home, she happily writes to him. However, the lies that he has told begin to unravel. Melvin reveals that he had in fact never been a soldier nor been to Iraq. The entire time that he has been writing it has been from his parents' garage where he lives in isolation. He has routed communication through his soldier brother so that he could have an authentic looking letter to send. While he is morbidly obese as he had stated before, he has not become so through rebellion against his role in Iraq. He has become obese because of an overwhelming tendency to self-destruct. Because Amélie becomes concerned about his mental state, she decides to visit him in Baltimore. However, after she begins the trip, she feels ill at ease and decides to feign participation in a terrorist group so that she will be arrested at the airport and will not have to meet Melvin. Like Melvin who chronically overeats, Amélie self-destructs and plunges herself into a diplomatic nightmare.

More so than most of her fictionalized autobiographies, *Une forme de vie* seems gleefully ridiculous. From Amélie's initial unquestioning belief of Melvin's story to her spectacular implosion at the novel's end, Nothomb seems more intent than ever to play narrative games with her readers. However, continuing her tendency to make light of very serious situations while also using said situations to reveal Amélie's flaws, Nothomb displays an uneasy relationship with the various versions of her fictional self. Tending towards the same sadistic wish for punishment as

Lê's narrators, Nothomb's Amélie appears equally self-destructive once the reader looks past the humor. As one juxtaposes Nothomb's texts with those of the preceding two authors, one notices that her reliance on black comedy and exaggeration serves to obfuscate suffering provoked by a traumatic exile and contentious parental relationships. Tracing a path through certain other of Nothomb's fictional autobiographies (*Métaphysique des tubes* and *Biographie de la faim*) in addition to *Une forme de vie*, I will supply context for the character of Amélie and her pathology that will eventually take its ideal form: the epistolary narrative. In a similar pattern to that of Lê, Nothomb's characters are part of an authorial hall of mirrors: the characters consistently mirror each other and their author. As Nothomb particularly enjoys pairing mirrored characters in dialogue, it is surprising that she waited until 2010 to publish an epistolary novel. These paired characters, like those of Lê, represent a cleavage of the self which has happened to Nothomb due to her repeated traumatic exiles. However, while Lê attempts to unite her characters through incest and correspondence, Nothomb's Melvin and Amélie become estranged from each other by the end of their letters. Nothomb follows in the epistolary footsteps of Laclos by creating untrustworthy correspondents who wear masks and manipulate. While Melvin and Amélie are not malicious like Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, they do tell lies about their emotional states and identities. Nothomb inscribes herself into this epistolary tradition while also inscribing herself into the tradition of the melancholic one-sided letter narrative.

Like Lê's use of the letter image, Nothomb repeats Amélie's manifestations of mental illness in an obsessive cycle that spans several works. Taking every opportunity to push her plots and narratives towards the bizarre, Nothomb's melancholic response to her rootlessness manifests through her boundary-pushing. Therefore, in this chapter, I will examine each of these manifestations as a result of melancholia and its twin, mania. In the first section following the

introduction, I will examine Amélie's grandiosity and narcissism in *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Une forme de vie* and the subsequent indications of melancholia/mania that these behaviors imply. Afterwards, I will analyze Nothomb's portrayals of anorexia and obesity in Freudian and Kleinian terms as demonstrative of troubled object relations. To conclude, I will discuss Melvin's mythomania and narcissism as complementary to Amélie's difficulties and will explore the final effects of the epistolary exchange on Amélie's breakdown on a transatlantic flight.

II. Grandiosity and Narcissism in *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Une forme de vie*

While Lê's characters struggle with the oppressive need to find roots through narcissistic unification with a self-similar, Nothomb's characters do not seek to unify with but rather to destroy the other. Unable to control their response to the world around them, Nothomb's fictional Amélie's go to extreme lengths to regain power in the situation, often resorting to self-destruction or even suicide. However, this self-destruction does not serve as Amélie's only defense against the encroaching doom of her traumatic childhood and exile. She also engages in textbook narcissistic behavior. The functioning definition of narcissism here is based on characteristics from object-relations theorists. Years after Freud's career ended, psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein and Alice Miller engaged with melancholia, narcissism, and love objects and created new theories about mania, grandiosity, and creativity that are particularly instructive in understanding Nothomb's works. As I will explain, the relationship between these features elucidates Amélie's struggles against melancholia and Nothomb's obsessive need to deny the melancholic response of her protagonist, perhaps at the expense of her own psyche.

In his discussion of melancholia, Freud states: "The most remarkable characteristic of melancholia, and the one in most need of explanation, is its tendency to change round into mania – a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms" (Freud, "Mourning" 253). Freud's further

development of mania in the essay creates a binary opposition between mania and melancholia in which mania indicates a release from the mourning of the lost love object. For Freud: "...the manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object which was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexis" ("Mourning" 255). Expanding upon this definition, Melanie Klein will later reveal that Freud's statements oversimplified the complicated object relationships that cause melancholia and mania.

Known as one of the cofounders of object-relations theory, Klein expanded upon many of the ideas that Freud posited about the ego, the object, and the libido. Klein also created a significant body of work discussing bipolar disorder (known at the time as manic-depression). Emphasizing the development of the infantile psyche, Klein notes two developmental stages in the pre-oedipal infant: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. The first of the two, the paranoid-schizoid position, begins the infant's understanding of its relationships to objects. At this stage, the infant experiences objects by splitting them into a "good" object and a "bad" object in his mind. In her explanation of this idea, Klein uses the example of the mother and her breast. When the mother's breast is present and available for nourishment for the hungry baby, it is the "good" breast. However, when it is taken away or is absent, it becomes the "bad" breast towards which the baby feels oral aggression. The act of splitting enables the child to understand what is "good" and what is "bad" and to identify with and introject the objects which are "good." While introjecting the "good" objects, the baby will seek out of anger to punish or eliminate the "bad" objects. In correlation, Klein notes that ego also splits with the splitting of the object; in other words, the infant who receives sustenance from the "good" breast and the one who is denied by the "bad" breast are not one in the same. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the infant sets up defenses to keep anxieties about persecution and being destroyed at bay; these

defenses include splitting in addition to introjection, projection, and feelings of omnipotence (Klein, "Notes" 1-24). The depressive position allows the infant to simultaneously experience good and bad rather than splitting the two in a binary relationship. In other words, the nourishment of the "good" breast and the denial of the "bad" breast come to be seen as merely two aspects of the same object rather than two separate objects. During the depressive position, the fear shifts from that of persecution/destruction to the fear of destroying others. It is during this period that the infant realizes its ability to hurt the love object (the mother in this case). Klein argues that the defenses used in the paranoid-schizoid position are the same as those used in the depressive position, but during the second period, the infant employs these defenses against depression and anxiety rather than persecution (Klein, "A Contribution" 282-310).

Klein labels these defenses as manic defenses as they appear in the depressive position and also can continue appearing in people suffering from pathological conditions. In "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," Klein argues:

Freud has stated that mania has for its basis the same contents as melancholia and is, in fact, a way of escape from that state. I would suggest that in mania the ego seeks refuge not only from melancholia but also from a paranoiac condition which it is unable to master. Its torturing and perilous dependence on its loved objects drives the ego to find freedom. But its identification with these objects is too profound to be renounced. On the other hand, the ego is pursued by its dread of bad objects... ("A Contribution" 297)

Thus, mania becomes an extreme effort to recover from melancholia. The fear of persecution that Klein detailed before is once again at play here in the form of paranoia; the infant cannot envisage existing without his or her "good" objects and thus becomes increasingly paranoid at the possibility of losing them. Pre-empting the possibility of loss, a person suffering under manic defenses experiences a sense of omnipotence that Klein views as part of the person's desire to control and master objects. This desire to control objects in turn causes the manic to be "hungry

for objects” because of the manic’s overwhelming drive to introject “good” objects (Klein, “A Contribution” 299).

While we can see mania and object relations issues in *Une forme de vie*, it will be necessary to first ground the discussion in Nothomb’s 2000 novel *Métaphysique des tubes* in order to tease out certain textual indications of narcissistic disturbance in the fictionalized Amélie across several narratives. Published after two other fictional autobiographies that recount later periods of Amélie’s life (1993’s *Le Sabotage amoureux* and 1999’s *Stupeurs et tremblements*), *Métaphysique des tubes* tells the story of Amélie from birth to the age of three. The novel emphasizes her early experiences in Japan. Because the novel details Amélie’s infant years, it displays several developmental situations from Klein’s theories.

As the novel begins, the name Amélie is nowhere to be found; however, Nothomb does introduce a character named “Dieu”: “Au commencement il n’y avait rien. Et ce rien n’était ni vide ni vague: il n’appelait rien d’autre que lui-même. Et Dieu vit que cela était bon...Dieu était l’absolue satisfaction. Il ne voulait rien, n’attendait rien, ne percevait rien, ne refusait rien et ne s’intéressait à rien” (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 5).³⁴ In this description, rather than beginning as the mere Amélie, the baby is an omnipotent being whose arrival on this planet has engendered it into existence. While this constitutes an obvious play on Genesis, it is indicative of the tone that Nothomb will maintain in reference to her protagonist for the rest of the novel. “Dieu” begins life extremely satisfied and is not plagued by desire. In fact, its satisfaction clearly stems from

³⁴ Nothomb’s characterization of the baby as God in many ways mirrors Freud’s discussion of “His Majesty the Baby”: “...they are inclined to suspend in the child’s favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves. The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation – ‘His Majesty the Baby,’ as we once fancied ourselves.” (Freud, “Narcissism” 91)

this lack of desire. Without love objects, Dieu has not yet experienced the rejections inherent to human life. As Nothomb rewrites her infancy, she projects a narcissistic mindset on to the baby as she does with many of her other characters. Dieu transforms into a grandiose figure as soon as Nothomb makes note of the name on the page. Writing in the third person for these passages, Nothomb detaches from Dieu and handles the character initially from a distance. At the end of the first chapter, Nothomb gives Dieu another name that will follow it until it becomes Amélie several chapters later: “le tube.” As “le tube,” the child is an empty vessel and a vegetable that does not initially concern itself with being filled.

When Dieu’s parents become concerned about the fact that it does not cry, the doctor states that the infant is pathologically apathetic and in a vegetative state. The parents proceed with their lives, and Dieu does not disturb them: “Depuis le commencement de l’univers, Dieu dormait dans la chambre de ses parents. Il ne les gênait pas, c’était le moins qu’on pût dire. Une plante verte eût été plus bruyante. Il ne les regardait même pas” (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 16). Here, Dieu seems like the parents’ ideal child despite its lack of development. Nothomb’s depiction notes that the baby does not disturb its parents and remains silent. However, because of its silence, Dieu also does not seem to notice. Nothomb’s Dieu is not only silent but does not even look at its parents. Thus, rather than looking to its parents for narcissistic fulfillment, Dieu maintains its omnipotence and can exist without the mirroring mother that other children need.

In her book *The Drama of the Gifted Child: How Narcissistic Parents Form and Deform the Emotional Lives of Their Talented Children*, Alice Miller addresses the implications of narcissistic disturbances in parents on children; essentially, the child also becomes narcissistically disturbed. The parent looks to the child to supply the love and admiration that was always denied to them by their own parents, and in turn, the child finds itself unusually in

tune with the parents' mood and learns to behave in ways that will not upset the parent by causing inadvertent damage to their delicate self-concept. In the process, many children attempt to become the ideal or "good" child. Miller expands upon this idea through the concept of mirroring:

Every child has a legitimate narcissistic need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously, and respected by his mother. In the first weeks and months of life he needs to have the mother at his disposal, must be able to use her and to be mirrored by her. This is beautifully illustrated in one of Winnicott's images: the mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and baby gazes at his mother's face and finds himself therein...provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own introjects onto the child. In that case, the child would not find himself in the mother's face but rather the mother's own predicaments. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain. (32)

While Nothomb does not extensively describe Dieu's emotional relationship with its mother, Miller's ideas have particular bearing on the passage from the last paragraph.

This rejection of the parental gaze does not end the baby's disconnection from its parents: "Au commencement, la mère avait essayé de lui donner le sein. Aucune lueur ne s'était éveillée dans l'œil du bébé à la vue de la mamelle nourricière: il resta nez à nez avec cette dernière sans en rien faire. Vexée, la mère lui glissa le téton dans la bouche. Ce fut à peine si Dieu le suçait. La mère décida alors de ne pas l'allaiter" (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 13). In contrast with Klein's theory, Dieu feels no attachment to the mother's breast, and without this attachment, it would be difficult for the child to move through the two stages that Klein outlines as part of infantile development. In Kleinian terms, the breast conflict manifests as the infant's induction into the world of "good" and "bad" objects. Without the necessary object attachments, Dieu is able to live an untroubled existence. However, this untroubled existence would be impossible without nourishment; in rejecting the mother's breast, Dieu is attempting self-destruction. Dieu's

rejection of food and tendency to self-destruct will later resurface as Amélie's anorexia in *Biographie de la faim*.

Dieu's existence may not be as detached and untroubled as these passages have indicated. As a one version of the fictional Amélie, Dieu is also part of a narrative that reflects back upon these early years from an adult perspective. This adult perspective treats this silent existence in which the child feels no attachment to the parents as unproblematic and covers over the emotional damage with humor. I will use these formative experiences in Amélie's life as a lens through which to analyze her many psychic troubles.

When Dieu is around two years old, its mother and governess awake to shrieking and find the baby who had never cried now in an uncontrollable rage. Dieu continues to scream; the parents telephone the infant's grandmother in Belgium to tell her to come visit because Dieu is finally awake. As the screaming continues, the parents become concerned once again but find that they can do nothing to assuage the child's fury. Nothomb explains Dieu's wrath: "Oui, mais pourquoi cette colère? La seule cause que l'on puisse supposer était l'accident mental. Quelque chose était apparu dans son cerveau qui lui avait semblé insoutenable. Et en une seconde, la matière grise s'était mise en branle" (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 23). Thus, through some sort of brain event, Dieu has developed an irresolvable need that it cannot yet express. This need is not for food because it is being adequately fed by bottle. However, because it does not have access to the object of its desire, the infant responds to perceived persecution with intense anger. As its name implies through omnipotence, Dieu's narcissism and need to be in total control of those around it represents a substantial part of the baby's behavior: "Dieu se conduisait comme Louis XIV: il ne tolérait qu'on dorme s'il ne dormait pas, qu'on mange s'il ne mangeait pas, qu'on marche s'il ne marchait pas et qu'on parle s'il ne parlait pas" (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 27). Dieu

punishes its parents for their inability to provide comfort; the mental incident which caused the rage becomes an instrument of control that it wields against the parents. It is able to manipulate them sadistically and becomes the center of attention for the family. As the center of attention, the baby assuages its narcissistic need for affirmation and further asserts its omnipotence. Nothomb constructs Dieu in grandiose terms rather than allowing the character to express hurt or frustration at its treatment by its parents.

Several pages later, Dieu stops screaming and becomes a sentient being after tasting Belgian white chocolate for the first time. At this juncture, the reader learns that the child is actually named Amélie. Amélie quickly makes up for the previous two and a half years. A very curious and precocious child, she becomes very attached to her Japanese governess, Nishio-san. In fact, after Nishio-san's appearance, Amélie's parents play a more marginal role in the novel. Amélie explains her preference for Nishio-san's Japanese cultural perspective when she mentions her governess's reverence for her:

Je m'aperçus très vite que mon âge me valait un statut spécial. Au pays du Soleil-Levant, de la naissance à l'école maternelle non comprise, on est un dieu. Nishio-san me traitait comme une divinité...Moi, j'étais un *okosama*: une honorable excellence enfantine, un seigneur enfant. (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 55)

Thus, throughout the novel, Nishio-san encourages Amélie's grandiosity and makes her feel as if she is an exceptionally bright child. Having referred to herself as a plant and feeling essentially ignored by her parents, Amélie aligns herself with her nanny instead. In *Les Identités d'Amélie* Nothomb, Mark D. Lee describes the relationship between Amélie and her Nishio-san:

Non seulement la divinité de la narratrice aux yeux de Nishio-san se recoupe-t-elle, quoique différemment, avec son statut de "dieu" du début du roman, mais aussi redresse et renverse-t-elle les comparaisons dépréciative aperçues dans l'attitude des vrais parents par rapport à ses deux aînés, lesquelles comparaisons ont dans l'esprit de la narratrice contribué à son sentiment d'évincement. Ainsi la narratrice décrit-elle dans les pages qui suivent comment Nishio-san la drolote, lui chante, lui raconte des histoires, lui déclare sa

beauté, la berce, l'habille en kimono, lui donne des mets japonais quand elle les veut...
(162)

Lee goes on to argue that Nishio-san in turn serves as a replacement for the mother from whom Amélie has felt detached since the novel's beginning. In his analysis, Lee also addresses Freud's construct of the family romance and Nishio-san's role as Amélie's replacement mother. As mentioned before, Dieu appears to be estranged from its mother at the novel's beginning – not looking at her or taking nourishment from her breast. While the mother should be the baby's first love object, she is not. She also does not serve as a mirror for the child to use to gain a healthy self-concept. However, Nishio-san clearly stands in for the mother in both cases. The governess provides Amélie with ample nourishment behind the mother's back; Amélie repeatedly asks for Japanese food, and Nishio-san always acquiesces to her requests. Amélie treats her mother's breast as if it has no nourishment to provide and acts mostly ambivalent to food on the whole, and yet, she cannot get enough of Nishio-san's food. In these interactions, it becomes clear that Amélie has created a version of Klein's "good" breast (Nishio-san's food) and "bad" breast (that of her mother). Additionally, the two women come to represent the two-sided mother, and Amélie consciously works to maintain the separation. When she first begins speaking, she speaks only to Nishio-san and only in Japanese. When the governess implies that the child should also speak to her parents, Amélie eventually decides to speak one word at a time in French despite already knowing many words. During this period, she has extended conversations with Nishio-san in secret. Because Amélie's mother does not speak Japanese, the child is able to keep her two worlds separate. Keeping the two worlds separate, she remains in Klein's paranoid-schizoid position; unable to reconcile that a mother can be both good and bad, she attributes characteristics to each that only serve to reaffirm the labels.

The feelings of omnipotence that Amélie cultivated as Dieu remain present in addition to Nishio-san's worship. While Amélie appears to be less grandiose than in her former life as a deity, she remembers her omnipotence fondly:

J'avais le souvenir vague d'avoir été Dieu, il n'y avait pas si longtemps. J'entendais parfois dans ma tête une grande voix qui me plongeait en d'incalculables ténèbres et qui me disait: 'Rappelle-toi! C'est moi qui vit en toi! Rappelle-toi!' Je ne savais pas trop ce que j'en pensais, mais ma divinité me paraissait des plus probables et des plus agréables. (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 40)

These constant efforts to remember her divine origins indicate a need to bolster her self-concept in the face of the world's rejections; treated by her parents as if she is not exceptional, Amélie reminds herself of her exceptionality through grandiose statements such as these. It is striking that the voice that speaks in this passage appears to be that of an adult Amélie. Appearing outside of the text's many dialogues, adult Amélie appears to also be reminding herself of her time as God just as the child once did. As we will see through the subsequent analysis of *Une forme de vie*, this need for narcissistic affirmation does not end for the character of Amélie in this novel. Rather, it becomes a manic defense against constantly encroaching feelings of annihilation and insecurity.

This need for self-annihilation stems from Nothomb's continuing portrayal of Amélie's melancholia. In her later essay "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States," Klein engages with the notions of normal mourning and abnormal mourning (melancholia):

The fundamental difference between normal mourning on the one hand, and abnormal mourning and manic-depressive states on the other, is this: The manic-depressive and the person who fails in the work of mourning, though their defences may differ widely from each other, have this in common, that they have been unable in early childhood to establish the internal 'good' objects and to feel secure in their inner world. They have never really overcome the infantile depressive position." (Klein, "Mourning" 337-338)

Klein indicates that the depressive position is a form of melancholia in and of itself and pinpoints the beginning of depressive feelings in the infant to the time period where the mother weans the

child. In reference to this first experience of mourning, Klein asserts that the child grieves the loss of the mother's breast, the love object which he or she associates with happiness and safety. When no longer given access to the breast, the child believes that he or she no longer will be able to feel love and happiness and believes that these things have been taken away because of the anger and frustration that he or she associated with the "bad" breast/mother. Klein states that the process of mourning for the adult causes a return to this first loss whenever an adult experiences grief. At the novel's end as Amélie learns that she will eventually have to leave Nishio-san and Japan, she begins the confusing exile that will plague her in later texts. Leaving her "good" mother behind, she follows her "bad" mother on her father's diplomatic assignments. Because of Nishio-san's association with Japanese food and language, she is an extension of the country in Amélie's mind. In turn, Japan functions as the "good" mother while every other country never lives up to Amélie's idealized life there. Always searching for the feeling of security that she felt as a child in "good" Japan, Amélie descends further into troubled exile as her character ages.

Nothomb portrays this traumatic exile throughout her texts, but in *Une forme de vie*, she mimics this exile portrayal in narrative form. As I discussed in the introduction to this project genres cannot because epistolarity allows for the displacement of the texts. While the characters and their authors are already displaced, the letter can also move from a "home" space to an exile space or vice versa. Nothomb's choice of the letter novel at this juncture in her writing career indicates a re-evaluation of her own exile and travel. The novel also indicates a return to one of her early favorite forms: the dialogue. *Une forme de vie* begins as Amélie receives a series of ego-supporting letters from Melvin Mapple. These ego-supporting letters appear in a narrative structure that reveals Nothomb's narcissism and crushing lack of confidence. Using Nothomb's earlier works, Shirley Ann Jordan explains a theory of Nothomb's combative dialogues: "Both

the notion of dialogue as conflict rather than collaboration and the notion of the adaptation of pre-existing genres place Nothomb in the framework of a Bakhtinian endeavor. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's definition of dialogue stresses common ground, collaboration, and co-existence, Mikhail Bakhtin stresses the struggle against the other" ("Amélie Nothomb's Combative Dialogues" 95). While Nothomb has relied heavily on the dialogue in past works like *Hygiène de l'assassin*, she has rarely used them in her fictional autobiographies, preferring to dazzle audiences with Amélie's witty inner monologues. The dialogues represent discussions which are occurring between two characters who mirror each other and also the author herself. *Une forme de vie* represents an epistolary exchange and appears on the surface to be a foray into a dialogic situation. However, the reader finishes the text confused as to whether or not there had been any true connection through correspondence between Amélie in Melvin. In terms of structure, Melvin's letters to Amélie are extremely detailed and provide a window into his (imaginary) life. In return, Amélie's letters are merely requests for more information from Melvin that reveal very little about her character. In a third space, Nothomb has Amélie engender a metadiscourse in which she discusses her true feelings about Melvin's letters and the fact that she is uneasy about their correspondence. Amélie assumes a tone of inflated self-importance throughout much of the novel's metadiscourse. She repeatedly references her importance to her readers, her book tours, and her newspaper articles and interviews.

Although *Une forme de vie* remains Nothomb's only epistolary narrative, Amélie's metadiscourse provides a probable explanation of the letter's role in the author's development. Reflecting upon her childhood, Amélie discusses her first true experience with writing herself into existence: letters to her grandfather in Belgium. Thus, her metadiscursive writing also demonstrates meta-epistolarity, where she writes theory about writing letters in a letter novel.

Before she begins describing her exchange with her grandfather, Amélie states: “Je suis épistolière depuis bien plus longtemps que je ne suis écrivain et je ne serais probablement pas devenue écrivain – en tout cas, pas cet écrivain – si je n’avais été d’abord, et si assidûment, épistolaire” (Nothomb 91). Beginning the practice of regular writing as a child, Amélie comes to understand the importance of the written word through this forced experience. She further describes:

Dès l’âge de six ans, sous la contrainte parentale, j’ai écrit une lettre par semaine à mon grand-père maternel, un inconnu qui vivait en Belgique. Mon frère et ma sœur aînés furent soumis au même régime. Nous devions chacun remplir de mots une feuille A4, à l’adresse de ce monsieur. Il répondait une page à chaque enfant. ‘Raconte ce qui t’est arrivé à l’école’, suggérait ma mère. ‘Ça ne va pas l’intéresser’, rétorquais-je. ‘Ça dépend de ta façon de la dire’ expliquait-elle.

Je me cassais la tête avec ça. C’était un cauchemar pire que les devoirs scolaires. À la place du vide du papier, il fallait que je trace des phrases susceptibles d’intéresser l’aïeul lointain. C’est le seul âge où j’aie connu l’angoisse de la page blanche, mais il a duré des années d’enfance, c’est-à-dire des siècles. (Nothomb 91)

Interestingly, Amélie’s grandfather is, as she mentions, a stranger who lives in Belgium with whom she would have little in common outside of her family and language. Entirely unfamiliar with both him and the country to which she is writing, she must find a way to engage with him despite their lack of cultural connection. In the process of developing the ability to connect with unknown readers, Amélie experiences the struggle against the blank page. As her mother attempts to explain how letters work, Amélie has difficulty believing that her stories about school will be interesting enough. Faced with the possibility of writing to Belgium, she finds herself faced with an entirely blank page, representative of her young identity and her displacement and distance from her “home” country of Belgium. In order to fill the page, she begins to tell stories about her life; however, because she believes that the original, true versions are not adequately entertaining, she learns that she must find interesting aspects to highlight, and, perhaps, in Amélie’s case, also exaggerate and embellish.

Continuing with the story about her grandfather, Amélie mentions another piece of advice that her mother gives her when she experiences her childhood writer's block. Amélie describes:

‘Commente ce qu’il t’écrit’, conseilla un jour ma mère qui me voyait sécher. Commenter signifiait décrire le propos de l’autre. À la réflexion, c’était ce que le grand-père faisait: ses lettres commentaient les miennes. Pas bête. Je l’imitai. Mes missives commentèrent son commentaire. Et ainsi de suite. C’était un dialogue bizarre et vertigineux, mais qui ne manquait pas d’intérêt. La nature du genre épistolaire m’apparut: c’était un écrit voué à l’autre. Les romans, les poèmes, etc. étaient des écrits dans lesquels l’autre pouvait entrer. La lettre, elle, n’existait pas sans l’autre et avait pour sens et pour mission l’épiphanie du destinataire. (Nothomb 91-92)

In reality, this exchange with her grandfather represents the first written dialogue in which young Amélie engages. However, in comparison with the combative dialogues that Shirley Ann Jordan describes, this epistolary dialogue does not entail the same struggle; rather, it becomes a document geared towards entertainment and storytelling that reflects little true emotion. As young Amélie attempts to appear more interesting than she feels, her grandfather reaffirms her narcissistic needs by being interested in her stories. Through this epistolary dialogue, she sees herself reflected positively in ways that Amélie from *Métaphysique des tubes* does not. Thus, she continues her letter writing career in an effort to find others who will serve as a mirror and reaffirm her grandiose and fragile self-image.

In her discussion of later letter-writing, Amélie asserts that her practice has served her well: “De même qu’il ne suffit pas d’écrire un livre pour être écrivain, il ne suffit pas d’écrire du courrier pour être épistolier” (Nothomb 93). She proclaims that she is a first-rate “épistolière,” establishing distance between herself and the fans who write to her. However, these fans serve a profound role in Amélie’s narcissistic behavior. Explaining her frequent exasperation with letters that she receives, Amélie notes: “‘D’habitude, je ne raffole pas de longues missives. Ce sont généralement les moins intéressantes. Depuis plus de seize ans, j’ai reçu un si grand nombre de

courriers que, sans le vouloir, j’ai développé une théorie instinctive et expérimentale de l’art épistolaire” (Nothomb 47). She reminds the reader of her importance by noting the volume of messages that she receives; clearly, she is in demand and has been since the age of sixteen. She has become an important figure to her correspondents and seeks to have her value confirmed by her piles of letters. Hungry for objects, she engages with strangers through letters because she can introject both their letters and the people themselves; these things constitute her identity and support her narcissism. Alice Miller notes a similar pattern: “The grandiose person’s partners...are also narcissistically cathected. Others are there to admire him, and he himself is constantly occupied, body and soul, with gaining that admiration” (39). In her epistolary exchanges, Nothomb wants correspondents who confirm her worth, and in this way, Melvin Mapple becomes her ideal interlocutor due to his worshipful attitude towards Amélie. As she notes: “On existe d’autant plus fort que l’autre le constate et on éprouve un déferlement d’enthousiasme pour cet individu providentiel qui vous donne la réplique. On attribue à ce dernier un nom fabuleux: ami, amour, camarade, hôte, collègue, selon. C’est une idylle. L’alternance entre l’identité et l’altérité (‘C’est tout comme moi! C’est le contraire de moi!’)...” (Nothomb 72). She finds support and strength in Melvin’s affirmation and only feels as if she exists through his affirmation. This theory of exchange is in direct contrast with Nothomb’s combative dialogues in that the correspondents are friendly and help to confirm identity. However, the first sentence departs from the symbiotic relationship between letter writers that Amélie has presented in this citation. Amélie establishes the separation between the two people writing.

At the beginning of the text, Amélie adopts a falsely modest tone as she begins corresponding with Melvin: “...il était hallucinant qu’il me l’écrive à moi” (Nothomb 8).

Because Melvin needs a confidant so desperately that he writes to an author with whom he had no prior relationship, and in having him do this, Nothomb breaks a convention of the epistolary novel. In the other novels examined in this project, the protagonist writes to a trusted friend, relative, or lover; in other words, the protagonist writes to a person with whom they have or have had a firmly established relationship. However, Amélie states that she has received letters from other strangers before: “J’avais déjà reçu sans surprise des plis de militaires belges ou français qui, le plus souvent, demandaient des photos dédiacées” (Nothomb 9). These soldiers did not attempt to establish any sort of personal relationship with Amélie; they merely want the superficial connection of an autographed picture, but their letters serve the same function as Melvin’s initial missives: to confirm universal love for Amélie.

Despite having had other correspondence relationships with fans, Amélie questions whether or not she wants to establish a relationship with Melvin: “D’autre part, avais-je envie de ses confidences ?” (Nothomb 9). Feeling significant doubt, Amélie decides that the proper course of action is to send copies of all her books in English to Melvin; she is fascinated by him, but also wants to establish the proper distance. He writes: “Je vous écris parce que je souffre comme un chien. J’ai besoin d’un peu de compréhension et vous, vous me comprendrez, je le sais. Répondez-moi. J’espère vous lire bientôt” (Nothomb 7). In her metadiscursive response, Amélie debates whether or not she should respond to such desperation. She eventually decides to send signed copies of her novels in English with no note. Melvin responds curtly and asks what exactly Amélie intends for him to do with the novels. Taken aback by the fact that Melvin was not writing to her to thank her and to affirm her kindness, Amélie attempts to be humorous in her response: “Je ne sais pas. Peut-être rééquilibrer un meuble ou surléver une chaise. Ou les offrir à un ami qui a appris à lire” (Nothomb 14).

Increasingly more interested because an American soldier has read all of her novels, Amélie feels reaffirmed as an author: "...j'étais ce personnage ridiculement ravi: l'auteur qui découvre que quelqu'un a tout lu de lui. Que ce quelqu'un fût un 2^e classe de l'armée américaine me combla encore davantage. Cela me donna l'impression d'être un écrivain universel. J'éprouvai une grotesque bouffée d'orgueil" (Nothomb 15). Because of this cross-cultural affirmation of her work, Amélie feels reinvigorated. Battling with chronic insecurity, Amélie feels validated when she learns that she is widely read. Like Dieu in *Métaphysique des tubes*, her universality gives her pretensions of omnipotence; Nothomb exercises her power as a popular author, and people like Melvin seek out her affirmation of their selfhood. Through the act of responding to their letters, she feels that she controls them, and this sense of control feeds her grandiosity.

However, receiving letters from fans does not suffice as ego support. Having narcissistically cathected the letters to support her desire for objects, Amélie is not satisfied. She needs others to know that she has received these letters in another assertion of superiority. Having begun corresponding with Melvin, she publicly boasts of her American pen pal: "Pendant ma tournée américaine, je ne manquai pas de répéter à qui voulait l'entendre que je correspondais avec un soldat basé à Bagdad qui avait lu tous mes livres. Les journalistes en furent favorablement impressionnés. Le *Philadelphia Daily Report* titra l'article 'U.S. Army Soldier reads Belgian writer Amélie Nothomb' " (Nothomb 17). As with her epistolary admirers, Amélie finds affirmation in the journalists' reaction to her American pen pal. In a striking twist, she mentions "The Philadelphia Daily Report," a newspaper that does not exist; considering that most of the novel and the names included have a basis in reality, this falsified newspaper

represents Amélie's continuing effort at self-promotion; even if her narcissistic self-celebration is imaginary, it is necessary to support her fragile ego.

Although Amélie writes as many letters as Melvin, she rarely reveals personal details; she mostly presses Melvin for information about his life. By revealing as little about herself as possible, she does not risk revealing a less than perfect version of herself to Melvin and thus does not risk refuting the hero worship that she requires. Several letters into their exchange, Melvin begins his personal history with the story of his parents' courtship and his early life. While describing the path that he took to enrollment in the army, Melvin details years of his life spent wandering throughout the United States. In the process, he describes an epiphany that he had: "Je voulais devenir le nouveau Kerouac, mais j'ai eu beau parcourir les routes sous benzédrine, je n'ai pas écrit une ligne valable. Je me suis rempli d'alcool pour devenir le nouveau Bukowski et là, j'ai touché le fond. Bon, j'ai compris que je n'étais pas un écrivain" (Nothomb 21). Melvin discusses his desire to be a writer and his disappointment that he is not. Amélie draws strength through the feelings of superiority that Melvin's failure provided. Because he is a failed writer, she believes that he will pose no threat to her role as author. She assumes that she will always be in a position of power as the "expert."

Having been pulled in by the initial chapters of Melvin's life, Amélie responds briefly: "Merci pour votre très intéressante lettre. Je l'ai beaucoup aimée, j'ai l'impression de mieux vous connaître. N'hésitez pas à me raconter la suite, ou d'autres parties de votre vie, comme vous voulez" (Nothomb 25). Although Amélie notes that she finds his prose worrisome because it clearly indicates that Melvin is mentally ill, she cannot resist establishing a relationship with him because of his need for her. He begs: "Je veux exister pour vous. Est-ce prétentieux? Je l'ignore. Si ça l'est, pardonnez-moi. C'est ce que je peux vous dire de plus vrai: je veux exister pour vous"

(Nothomb 57). In passages like these, Melvin reveals his own narcissistic need for Amélie's admiration. Without her correspondence to reflect his image back to him, he would descend further into a cycle of annihilation. In fact, as he writes to Amélie, he actively constructs a version of himself in both Iraq that exists outside of his meager life in his parents' garage in Baltimore. Like Nothomb's professed pathological need to write, Melvin appears to pathologically need to be someone else.

Despite her unconventional use of the epistolary form, Nothomb is insistent that she and Amélie are highly versed in the epistolary arts. Ranging from outright allusion to historical texts to discussion of her own letter writing history, Amélie refutes any concern that one might have about her knowledge of the genre. Amélie's letters and Nothomb's text insistently use intertextual references to display knowledge of the epistolary form. These allusions engender legitimacy in the work and also portray the author as completely in control of her text. Both the writer and her character search for legitimacy through outside validation. Shirley Ann Jordan notes Nothomb's frequent displays of intertextuality:

All the combatants in Nothomb's dialogues are of course drawing from one repository of erudition, wit and intellectual agility: the author herself, the holder of all the cards. Her indifference to differentiation of voice throughout her work allows us...to view this corpus as a polished showcase for her ingenuity. Everything in her texts points us back to her own astonishing and precocious cleverness... ("Amélie Nothomb's Combative Dialogues" 100)

Like her author, Amélie's usage of supporting texts points to her intellectual superiority. Seeking this support simultaneously displays her insecurity about her own texts and her narcissism. On the narcissistic side, Jordan's last statement confirms the self-promoting aspects of these displays of erudition. They provide distance between the author and the readers once again by limiting how much the reader can connect to Nothomb's inner world.

The allusion that is most instructive for our purposes is to one of the most celebrated of the *épistolières*: Madame de Sévigné. Amélie's Sévigné reference does not give much detail; in fact, Amélie mentions her and immediately moves on: "Madame de Sévigné l'a très bien dit: 'Pardonnez-moi, je n'ai pas le temps de faire court.' Elle illustre d'ailleurs très mal ma théorie: ses épîtres sont toujours passionnantes" (Nothomb 48). Madame de Sévigné has historically served as a model for the theories of epistolarity. However, Amélie's allusion shows little knowledge of Sévigné's works; it displays common knowledge. Wanting to be seen as highly educated and informed, she includes this statement without any development. This lack of development does not preclude this allusion from being instructive in our developing understanding of Amélie's narcissism. Critics of the epistolary text have devoted significant attention to Sévigné; of her collected letters, perhaps the most famous are those which she wrote to her daughter. In *Uneasy Possessions: The Mother-Daughter Dilemma in French Women's Writings, 1671-1928*, Katharine Ann Jensen examines domination and submission in mother-daughter relationships with a particularly engaging chapter on Sévigné and her daughter, Grignan: "Without a compliant daughter to receive her letters, compliment them, and authorize Sévigné's ambition to continually write, Sévigné could be extraordinary neither as mother nor writer. The least hint that Grignan might have desires of her own, independent of her mother's threatened the accomplishment of Sévigné's ambitions." (136). Melvin fulfills a role similar to that of Grignan; Amélie needs his attention to assuage her insecurities and maintain her narcissistic self-concept. It is striking, however, that the inverse is also true of Melvin and Amélie's epistolary relationship; Melvin does not exist in the form that he exists in his letters in the novel's reality. He needs Amélie's belief in his artistic abilities to continue his efforts and to develop an alternate self. Amélie's need for Melvin stems from her claimed superiority over him;

by serving as his “mentor” from her superior position, she dominates him and is able to exercise control in the exchange. In mentioning Sévigné (however briefly), Nothomb aligns herself with her and establishes a common mission: to be an accomplished letter-writer. Like Sévigné, Amélie’s letter-writing displays her desire to demonstrate her wit and to be worshipped by those who read her.

III. Anorexia and Obesity

Because Nothomb’s fictional autobiographies constitute an ongoing project of self-writing, it is in turn important to trace the themes of food, obsession, and anorexia through two works that appear before *Une forme de vie*. The reader cannot fully appreciate Nothomb’s version of the repetition compulsion without noting instances of her obsession with overconsumption and its inverse, total abstinence, throughout her portrayals of Amélie. Melanie Klein alludes to a “hunger for objects” that occurs during the infant’s depressive stage. Corresponding the oral stage, this hunger for objects indicates a need to incorporate them into the self. Lê’s texts search for this incorporation through incest and actual cannibalism due to her fixation on her father as lost love object. By contrast, Nothomb’s Amélie does not associate these oral tendencies with a specific person. Also desperate to incorporate objects into herself, Amélie becomes preoccupied by food. In *Métaphysique des tubes*, Amélie’s transformation from her vegetative state as Dieu to sentient being occurs after her Belgian grandmother gives her a piece of white chocolate:

En effet, une main apparaît dans son champ de vision mais – stupeur! – il y a entre ses doigts un baton blanchâtre. Dieu n’a jamais vu ça et en oublie de crier.

-C’est du chocolat blanc de Belgique, dit la grand-mère à l’enfant qu’elle découvre...

-C’est pour manger, dit la voix.

Manger: Dieu connaît. C’est une chose qu’il fait souvent. Manger, c’est le biberon, la purée avec des morceaux de viande, la banane écrasée avec la pomme râpée et le jus d’orange.

Manger, ça sent...Dieu a peur et envie en même temps. Il grimace de dégoût et salive de désir. (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 30)

In this passage, Dieu's initial reaction to the verb "manger" is to list things that it normally eats without any discussion as to whether or not it enjoys them. The piece of white chocolate creates a powerful response that is both good and bad, like Klein's mother. In fact, it is through the consumption of chocolate that Dieu has its first experience of self/ego; whereas Nothomb's narration is in the third person until this point, the white chocolate causes a mental shift that predicates a shift in narration: "C'est moi! C'est moi qui vit! C'est moi qui parle! Je ne suis pas 'il' ni 'lui,' je suis moi!" (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 30). The distant Dieu disappears, and Amélie surfaces as narrator. With this discovery of her "moi," Amélie asserts her identity having experienced the oral pleasure of consumption.³⁵ Until this formative moment, Amélie had not experienced object love, and now that she has experienced it, she can define her "self" in opposition to objects. In Kleinian terms, Dieu was isolated in her inner world and comes to understand the "good" objects of the external world through the chocolate bar. Displaying a tendency towards the extreme, Amélie will consume as much chocolate and sugar as her parents allow. While she knows that chocolate provided her with unknown subjectivity, her mother does not understand her daughter's need for it: "Ma mère avait des théories sur le sucre, qu'elle rendait responsable de tous les maux de l'humanité. C'est pourtant au 'poison blanc' (ainsi le nommait-elle) qu'elle doit d'avoir un troisième enfant qui soit d'une humeur acceptable" (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 33). Hyperbolically afraid of sugar, the mother appears to attempt to limit Amélie's intake of it before discovering that Amélie needs it to be agreeable. As the

³⁵ Claire Nodot-Kaufman notes the intense relationship in Nothomb's works between her Belgian identity and the food and drink that she had associated with Belgium: "Je propose donc le terme 'beljouissance' pour définir le rapport de Nothomb à son identité belge, découverte à travers le plaisir oral de la nourriture, et réaffirmée à travers le plaisir de l'écriture" (40). For more about this topic, consult : Claire Nodot-Kaufman. "Mortes-Frontières ou 'Beljouissance'? Amélie Nothomb, écrivain belge." *Chimères*. 30 (Spring 2007). 29-43.

controlling influence here, Amélie's mother represents the ego ideal or the conscience that should manage Amélie's cravings and keep her from overindulging. However, Amélie treats her mother's warning sarcastically and remains defiant because her "bad" mother is denying her the nourishment she needs. The passage's final statement reveals the level of dissatisfaction that the mother feels because of her daughter's desires, and one can interpret Amélie's mask of humorous defiance as an effort to repress negative feelings about not meeting the mother's expectations. At the beginning of the following chapter, Amélie mimics Dieu's narcissism in her narration: "En me donnant une identité, le chocolat blanc m'avait aussi fourni une mémoire: depuis février 1970, je me souviens de tout" (Nothomb, *Métaphysique* 35). With her identity as an oral pleasure seeker in place, Amélie can begin telling her story; however, as she boasts that she remembers everything since that date, she continues with a grandiose self-concept. Having established herself as extraordinary despite no longer being "Dieu," Amélie recounts her life until the age of three.

Nothomb's 2004 fictional autobiography *Biographie de la faim* takes as its subject matter exactly what the title implies. In *Biographie de la faim*, Nothomb recounts the different stages of her childhood and adolescence through a series of vignettes occurring at each of her father's diplomatic posts. She begins the novel with an extended description of the Vanuatu, a people from the South Pacific who have never known hunger. This story about the lack of hunger and thus desire becomes a lens through which to view Amélie's ongoing struggle with her irrepressible desire for excess and her incredible object hunger. At the age of five, Amélie experiences the first in a series of traumatic ruptures. At that time, her father's diplomatic post moves from Japan to China and thus, the family must relocate. While Amélie indicates the possibility of departure in *Métaphysique des tubes*, Nothomb does not dramatize the character's

actual exile until *Biographie de la faim* Amélie explains her sadness: “Toute nostalgie est nippone. Il n’y a pas plus japonais que de languir sur son passé et sur sa majesté révolue et que de vivre l’écoulement du temps comme une défaite tragique et grandiose... Une fillette belge pleurant au souvenir du pays du Soleil-Levant mérite doublement la nationalité japonaise” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 67). Young Amélie, a speaker of both French and Japanese feels adrift when she leaves Japan. In this passage, an older Amélie appears to be reflecting on the profound effect that her exile has had; like Lê, her relationship with the country as she has aged has become increasingly inflected with nostalgia. Distance from the country has produced an idealized picture of its perfection; contributing to this idealization, Amélie associates Japan with her “good” mother, Nishio-san and thus further ingrains its superiority. Without Nishio-san’s worshipful gaze, Amélie enters an abyss where no one confirms her selfhood.

In her first-person account of Japan, Amélie describes her relationship with her family, her experiences at Japanese nursery school, and her obsession with sugary foods. As in *Métaphysique des tubes*, this obsession with sugar becomes a point of concern for Amélie’s mother who actively limits the child’s access to the food she loves. However, Amélie demonstrates that this desire for sugary treats extends beyond a mere craving. Rather, it constitutes a compulsion. Simultaneously, Amélie observes and describes her father’s eating habits:

C’est un homme à qui l’on joua un sale tour: on lui imposa l’obsession de bouffer et, quand il en fut bien atteint, on le mit au régime jusqu’à la fin de ses jours. Mon pauvre père connut ce sort absurde: la contrariété est son lot.

Il mange à une rapidité effrayante, ne mâche rien, et avec une telle angoisse qu’il semble n’y prendre aucun plaisir. Je suis toujours étonnée quand j’entends des gens le qualifier de bon vivant. Sa rondeur les trompe: c’est l’anxiété personnifiée, incapable de jouir du présent. (Nothomb, *Biographie* 29)

Because the child is equally inclined to overconsume, Amélie's mother begins to compare the two: "Ma mère décida très vite que j'étais mon père. Là où il y avait une ressemblance, elle vit une identité. Quand j'avais trois ans, j'accueillais les hordes d'invités de mes parents en leur affirmant d'un ton las: 'Moi, c'est Patrick.' Les gens étaient stupéfaits" (Nothomb, *Biographie* 29). As her mother once again emerges as a critical figure, Amélie aligns herself with her equally afflicted father. In her father, Amélie searches for an adult presence who mirrors her; by adopting his identity with her parents' guests, she attempts to create a "good" mother (her father) in contrast with the limiting and controlling "bad" mother who watches her daughter's diet. Unable to see herself reflected in the mother and consequently experiencing an object loss, Amélie continues to search for objects to consume to alleviate her rapidly developing hunger for objects.

The next manifestation of her overconsumption comes in the form of childhood alcoholism. Being a diplomat, Amélie's father often entertains guests at cocktail parties at the family home. Having impressed the guests by telling them "Moi, c'est Patrick," she stays at the parties, but spends the entire time sneaking around and stealing drinks: "Personne ne me voyait attraper les flûtes de champagne qui traînaient à moitié pleines. D'emblée, le vin doré à bulles fut mon meilleur ami..." (Nothomb, *Biographie* 43). By doing this, she becomes drunk, and somehow, no one notices. In this scene, Nothomb once again portrays Amélie as being silent and ignored by her parents. Displaying a troubling behavior, she overconsumes as her parents go about their business unbothered. As the description continues, more adults fail to notice her troubles as she describes her experience at *yôchien* (Japanese kindergarten) after her alcoholic activities: "Au *yôchien*, j'avais parfois la gueule de bois. Le pissenlit belge marchait moins droit que les autres...Personne ne soupçonna que l'alcoolisme était l'explication de mon handicap"

(Nothomb, *Biographie* 43). As the teachers also fail to recognize that there is a problem, Amélie narcissistically states that no one suspected that her troubles had their roots in an alcoholic compulsion. Continuing the repetition of this obsessive hunger for objects, Amélie fixates next on water: “La surfaim inclut la sursoif. Je me découvrais très vite une propriété formidable: la potomanie” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 47).³⁶ In turn, Amélie drinks so much water that her stomach becomes distended and only stops because she cannot physically drink any more. Having moved through these three obsessions, Amélie’s hunger for objects is out of control. Attempting to gain satisfaction from replacement love objects, the character descends into a pattern of never feeling satisfaction of her desires.

She also begins to describe her body as “mal fiché;” in fact, the descriptions of the child show her as deformed: “...une énorme tête posée sur des épaules débiles de bras trop longs, un tronc trop grand, des jambes minuscules, maigres et cagneuses, la poitrine creuse, le ventre gonflé et projeté en avant par une scoliose dramatique...” (Nothomb 45). Judging from this depiction, Amélie’s physical deformity would make her nearly as grotesque as Hugo’s Quasimodo. Interestingly, this extreme image does not refer to an adult character; rather, this grotesque figure is a child of four or five. Thus, this level of deformity as observed by the adult narrator in reference to the child Amélie indicates a destructive vision of her own image that will persist and will later transform into anorexia. Despite this deformed image, Amélie states that her beloved Japanese nanny Nishio-san would always tell her that she was beautiful. Struggling with a desperate need for love Amélie is briefly assuaged by Nishio-san’s love but finds that she cannot satisfy her desire.

³⁶ For more information on Nothomb’s use of water imagery, please see Désirée Pries’s article that I have cited elsewhere in this chapter.

In nearly every text since beginning her career in 1992, Nothomb has included characters that represent her confused binary thinking in reference to the human body that Amélie's self-descriptions indicate; she often portrays obese, unattractive men and beautiful, extremely lithe women. The immensely positive image of these thin women contributes to what Catherine Rodgers terms Nothomb's "anorexic sensibility": "The disgust at the adult female body, the absence of genital sexuality, the ideal of the thin, smooth and clearly contained childish body, even the need to control the Other and the absence of a clear boundary between the self and other, all point to an anorexic sensibility" (Rodgers 58). While Nothomb often depicts a version of herself named Amélie, this image of the beautiful thin woman does not apply to the character. Instead, Nothomb depicts Amélie at times as physically deformed. This theme of Amélie's physically deformed body manifests itself in most of Nothomb's portrayals of her fictional self and also in most of her fictional protagonists. Nothomb has admitted to having particular difficulties with food and her body weight in public interviews.³⁷

While China proves to be problematic and confusing, the family does not languish there long before Patrick changes posts once again, and the family moves to New York. Amélie loves the family's fast-paced New York life and develops a strong attachment to her new allophone nanny, Inge. However, as with all diplomatic posts, this position is also transitory. Now an adolescent, Amélie leaves the glamour of New York for relative squalor in Bangladesh. After the family leaves Japan, Amélie becomes increasingly confused and disenfranchised. As Amélie begins describing Bangladesh, she constantly notes the poverty and hunger surrounding her. The suffering around her becomes an external representation of her inner turmoil, and she begins refusing to leave the family home. In contrast with the energetic and precocious child and

³⁷See: Jasper Rees. "A Writer's Life: Amélie Nothomb." *The Telegraph*. The Telegraph, 23 July 2006. Web. 26 April 2012.

adolescent that Nothomb has presented thus far, the new more deeply exiled version of Amélie no longer has the capacity to express herself: “Je me tus” (Nothomb 135). Examining the pronunciation of the verb “tus,” the reader readily thinks of another verb that is a homophone when conjugated in the same form: “tue.” Thus, while Amélie silences herself, she is also killing herself. Before this move, Amélie is already struggling with the constant geographical displacement. The adolescent’s self-silencing intensifies after a particularly frightening scene that occurs during a family trip to the Bay of Bengal:

Un jour, comme j’étais dans l’eau depuis des heures, très loin du rivage, mes pieds furent attrapés par des mains nombreuses. Autour de moi, personne. Ce devait être les mains de la mer.

Ma peur fut si grande que je n’eus plus de voix.

Les mains de la mer remontèrent le long de mon corps et arrachèrent mon maillot de bain.

Je me débattais avec l’énergie du désespoir, mais les mains de la mer étaient fortes et en surnombre.

Autour de moi, toujours personne.

Les mains de la mer écartèrent mes jambes et entèrent en moi.

La douleur fut si intense que la voix me fut rendue. Je hurlai.

Ma mère m’entendit et courut me rejoindre dans les vagues, en hurlant aussi démentiellement qu’une mère peut hurler. Les mains de la mer me lâchèrent.

Ma mère me prit dans ses bras et me ramena sur la plage.

Au loin, on vit sortir de l’eau quatre Indiens de vingt ans, aux corps minces et violents. Ils s’enfuirent à la course. Ils ne furent jamais retrouvés. On me vit plus dans aucune eau. (Nothomb, *Biographie* 151-152)

This passage lacks the humor and irony typical of Nothomb’s style. No longer using her favorite narrative defenses, she proclaims the severity of her traumatic ordeal. In this scene, Amélie is alone without any form of protection. She cannot control the violent actions of the men around her, and her mother, far away on the beach, cannot intervene until it is too late. Once again feeling abandoned by her mother, Amélie experiences a significant psychological disturbance as a result of the attack.

After this passage, she bluntly states: “La vie devient moins bien” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 152). Ten pages later, her already troubled relationship with her body deepens: “Mon corps se déforma...J’étais immense et laide...” (Nothomb, *Biographie* 162). Unlike the earlier images of her deformed body, this passage implies that Amélie’s body is changing without her consent. Puberty combined with molestation produces an intense distaste for her transforming womanly body. In her astute article discussing *Métaphysique des tubes*, Désirée Pries discusses the underlying tension between Amélie and her developing body: “Amélie’s true fear, in fact, is to become a woman. The fall she fears is the transformation of her flesh or puberty...Her hands trace along her body, imagining the round curves of womanhood. She wishes to stop this progression, this ‘fall’ ” (Pries 30). This fear of the adult female body is typical of an anorexic mentality that has developed in response to a particular trauma. Brumberg describes: “...anorexia nervosa is seen as a pathological response to the developmental crisis of adolescence. Refusal of food is understood as an expression of the adolescent’s struggle over autonomy, individuation, and sexual development” (Brumberg 28). Having experienced molestation in the Bay of Bengal, Amélie attempts to halt her sexual development because she sees her developing female body as the reason that she had this experience with these men. She believes that her normal development is her body deforming. Amélie lacks control of the molestation, and thus, her response to this becomes an attempt to control her body and create it in her own image.

Combining this assault with the entire lack of power that Amélie feels as she moves from country to country due to her father’s job, she attempts to assert power in the only way that she feels she can: through controlling her food intake. In *Fasting Girls*, Joan Brumberg examines anorexia nervosa as a condition exhibited by middle class girls during the Victorian period.

Despite there being nearly a hundred years between the girls that Brumberg describes and the narrator, Amélie turns to food refusal for similar reasons as the young Victorian women.

Brumberg asserts:

Because food was a common resource in the middle-class household, it was available for manipulation. Middle class girls...turned to food as a symbolic language, because the culture made an important connection between food and femininity and because girls' options for self-expression outside the family were limited by parental concern and social convention...Young women searching for an idiom in which to say things about themselves focused on food and the body. (188)

Brumberg mentions the manipulative possibilities of food for these girls in the context of their families. Because they were silenced and often had little control over the trajectory of their lives, these young women seized control of their food intake as a method of self-expression. Teenage Amélie resorts to the same action and begins to communicate by abusing her body rather than through written or spoken language. With no choice as to where she lives, Amélie's exile becomes increasingly intense with each move. Finally, combining this exile with sexual abuse, Amélie experiences a rupture of her self. Amélie states the following about her subsequent decision to stop eating: "Au Bangladesh, on m'avait appris que la faim était une douleur qui disparaissait très vite: on en subissait les effets sans plus en subir la souffrance. Forte de cette information, je créai la Loi: le 5 janvier 1981, jour de la Sainte-Amélie, je cesserais de manger" (Nothomb 166). Having been so surrounding by hunger, she decides that she can also go without eating.

While this decision to stop eating initially seems to be a response to Amélie's traumatic episode in the Bay of Bengal, it also has earlier underpinnings in her troubled reactions as a small child. As a child, she consumes as many objects (food, alcohol, water) as she can in her attempts to find replacement objects for her parents. Her turn towards anorexia does indicate a desire to control, but it also represents another manifestation of the character's melancholic

response. Amélie re-enacts the narcissistic relationship with the mother through anorexia.³⁸ After her mother has tried to limit her consumption for years, Amélie begins to do so herself. No longer content to be defiant, she attempts to mirror her mother while also punishing herself in a sadistic enactment of her trauma:

If the love for the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without a doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self in the ways that we have been discussing. (Freud, "Mourning" 251)

Because young Amélie's strained relationship with her parents results in narcissistic behavior in both *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Biographie de la faim*, her anorexic self-abuse becomes an extension of her efforts to exact revenge upon them for her childhood. Her troubled relationship with food mirrors that of both her parents, and with sadistic aplomb, she disobeys their requests to eat.

However, eventually Amélie's body revolts against being her mode of communication, and she is forced to begin eating again. This forced act represents yet another action in Amélie's life that is outside of her control. Amélie searches for another outlet for her desperation and desire for control and agency. Having begun eating again, Amélie's focus shifts from food deprivation to finding another obsessive act. Amélie details the discovery of her emergence from anorexia:

³⁸ In an article about another of Nothomb's novels, *Robert des noms propres*, Siobhán McIlvanney examines the author's portrayal of another anorexic character: "In a text permeated with ambivalence, anorexia can be seen to strengthen ties with the mother through its imprisonment of the individual in a pre-pubescent corporeal state, yet also clearly represents a means of escape and of self-defence, in which the narrator displaces the psychological traumas of the past onto a physical form, a form which serves to anaesthetize her emotions..." (24). Despite discussing a novel that I will not examine at length, this passage provides a useful interpretation of a mother-daughter relationship. McIlvanney interprets the novel through the lens of trauma studies without mention of melancholia, but her description here uses several key words that denote anorexia as a pathological response, such as "ambivalence" and "self-defense."

L'anorexie m'avait servi de leçon d'anatomie. Je connaissais ce corps que j'avais décomposé. Il s'agissait à présent de le reconstruire.

Bizarrement, l'écriture y contribua. C'était d'abord un acte physique: il y avait des obstacles à vaincre pour tirer quelque chose de moi.

Cet effort constitua une sorte de tissu qui devint mon corps. (Nothomb, *Biographie* 179)

Amélie tries to understand her confusion through writing, and writing also helps her in reconstituting a body post-anorexia. Relating the physical sensation of self-starvation to the physical sensation of putting words on a page, writing provides an outlet for Amélie's need for a compulsion and reveals her object difficulties. Amélie decides to construct a world whose trajectory she actively controls. In this world, she controls her objects and can destroy them at will.

The novel ends soon after Amélie begins eating again and yet her overwhelming hunger and desire remain unresolved:

La faim, c'est moi... Aussi loin que remontent mes souvenirs, j'ai toujours crevé de faim... Encore faut-il préciser que ma faim est à comprendre en son sens le plus vaste: si ce n'avait été que la faim des aliments, ce n'eût peut-être pas été si grave. Mais est-ce que cela existe, n'avoir faim que de nourriture? Existe-t-il une faim du ventre qui ne soit l'indice d'une faim généralisée? Par faim, j'entends ce manqué effroyable de l'être entière, ce vide tenaillant, cette aspiration non tant à l'utopique plénitude qu'à la simple réalité: là où il n'y a rien, j'implore qu'il y ait quelque chose. (Nothomb, *Biographie* 20)

While throughout much of *Biographie de la faim*, food seems to be the most problematic force, here Amélie states that hunger for food in her case is merely a substitute for a greater unknown desire. This unknown desire manifests in each appearance of the fictional Amélie. In the version of Amélie that Nothomb creates for *Une forme de vie*, Nothomb omits these issues with hunger and instead projects this hunger on to Melvin Mapple.

As Amélie begins her correspondence with Melvin, she is immediately drawn in by his need for her because this need supports her narcissistic drive to find replacement objects to cathect. Initially, Melvin seems somewhat uncomfortable and secretive. However, the reasons

for his discomfort are soon clear: “Je suis obèse. Ce n’est pas ma nature. Enfant, adolescent, j’étais normal” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 27). Upon revealing that he is obese, Melvin immediately feels shame and attempts to defend himself; however, despite feeling shame for his physical condition, he openly discusses it with a woman that he knows only through a handful of letters.

Nothomb has Melvin describes his obesity, thereby creating more connections between his character, that of the fictionalized Amélie, and the author. In *Biographie de la faim*, Amélie openly discusses her “gourmandise” in addition to her anorexia. While the version of Amélie in *Une forme de vie* does not manifest the very same problematic relationship with food, her paired character of Melvin now displays this compulsion. In her pivotal work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo argues that the complicated rapports between the body and mind in the Western philosophical tradition continue to affect the modern view of the human body. Bordo thus relates this tradition to the treatment of the body as something that needs to be conquered and controlled. She asserts the following:

I am referring, of course, to our dualistic heritage: the view that human existence is bifurcated into two realms or substances: the bodily or material, on the one hand; the mental or spiritual, on the other...First, the body is experienced as *alien*, as the not-self, the not-me...Second, the body is experienced as *confinement and limitation*: a “prison,” a “swamp,” a “cage,” a “fog” – all images that occur in Plato, Descartes, and Augustine – from which the soul, will, or mind struggles to escape...Third, the body is *the enemy*, as Augustine explicitly describes it time and time again, and as Plato and Descartes strongly suggest in their diatribes against the body as the source of obscurity and confusion in our thinking...the body is the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*. (Bordo 144-145)

Extending the binary/paired aspect of the novel’s two characters, one could view Melvin as representing the alien, subversive body to Amélie’s closely controlled mind. In the epistolary structure, there is often an emphasis on the correspondent as Other to establish the distance between the exchange participants. With his tendencies towards overconsumption, Melvin represents the unrestricted desire that character of Amélie has experienced in earlier novels.

Thus, he represents the Other for Amélie. As she othered her body through anorexia in *Biographie de la faim*, she attempted to control her alien pubescent body through the act of self-starvation.

As Melvin displays the same epicurean difficulties and writerly desire, that both Amélie and Nothomb possess, he represents a facet of fictional Amélie's self just as he represents a mirror through which Nothomb works to construct her self identity. In her book *Le récit siamois: Identité et personnage dans l'œuvre d'Amélie Nothomb*, Laureline Amanieux examines the theme of doubles in Nothomb's novels:

Ces deux versions sont alors ce que je nomme des jumelles "siamois," car le roman ne donne pas de préférence et laisse le lecteur entre les deux. Nous choisissons cette expression de "récit siamois" pour désigner les œuvres d'Amélie Nothomb parce que ce terme de "siamois" désigne par extension une pathologie propre à la grossesse gémellaire. Outre la tendance de la romancière à décrire son activité d'écrivain comme une pathologie, ce terme rappelle la métaphore de l'enfantement qu'elle emploie pour ces romans: tous sont ses "enfants." (53)

Following Amanieux's examination of this theme, Nothomb's novels typically contain characters that mirror each other and thus form two halves of a singular identity. In many of her novels, there exists a female and male pairing in which each character represents one half of a "récit siamois" as Laureline Amanieux labels it. In terms of narrative, this tendency towards character pairing is perhaps nowhere near as integral to the structure as in *Une forme de vie*'s epistolary exchange between Melvin and Amélie. In the other novels included in this project, the primary letter writers write to a Passive Confidant. Interestingly, Melvin and Amélie represent paired characters that account for two sides of a mutual self, and, thus, by writing to each other, they are performing a reflexive writing act similar to the journal-like writing act of Lê and Pineau's narrators. For Melvin, the letter exchange is more of a process of self-discovery than it is for Amélie. However, the self that Melvin creates is the product of a series of lies at the

novel's beginning. As he puts a significant amount of effort into a constructed identity, Nothomb calls into question the epistolary act, subjectivity, and veracity. By having Melvin's identity represent a complex series of lies, Nothomb consciously deconstructs the personage that she envisions. Consequently, Amélie discovers that her relationship with Melvin is false and also discovers that Melvin is as accomplished an author as she is because of the quality of his story. After these discoveries, Amélie implodes and engages in a profound act of international self-destruction when she turns herself in for terrorist activities. This collapse of subjectivity indicates the continuing struggle experienced by Nothomb in resolving her problems through the act of writing her novels.

Thus, as Amélie's double, Melvin's obsession with food becomes another example of her "gourmandise." In fact, Melvin alludes to her fraught relationship with food when he mentions that she is the only person who could understand him. Melvin describes his eating habits and struggles with the life of a soldier in Iraq:

On revient du combat choqué, éberlué d'être vivant, épouvanté, et la première chose qu'on fait après avoir changé de pantalon (on souille le sien à tous les coups), c'est se jeter sur la bouffe. Plus exactement, on démarre par une bière – encore un truc de gros, la bière. On écluse une ou deux canettes et puis on attrape le consistant. Les hamburgers, les frites, les *peanut butter and jelly sandwiches*, l'*apple pie*, les *brownies*, les glaces, on peut y aller à volonté... On est fou. Quelque chose est cassé en nous. On ne peut pas dire qu'on aime manger comme ça, c'est plus fort que nous, on pourrait se tuer de nourriture, c'est peut-être ce qu'on cherche. (Nothomb, *Une forme* 28)

In Melvin's imaginary life as a soldier, the only way to manage the stress is to overconsume. For Amélie in *Biographie de la faim*, the only way that she feels able to control the stress of her life in exile is to refuse food. However, her refusal of food does not mean that she was not obsessed with consumption. In the later version of Amélie, the thin older woman becomes fascinated with obese Melvin, partially because he represents a life she wishes that she could lead – a life of unbridled gluttony. The sheer excess of this passage is astonishing and holds some level of

attraction for Amélie as she continues writing to Melvin. However, she is also repulsed by Melvin as she is repulsed by her own need for food.

Several letters in, Melvin begins to revalorize his weight gain by making it into an artistic act: “Bref, cette obésité est devenue mon œuvre” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 63). Not satisfied by the work that he has done in his letter writing to Amélie, he attributes value to something that many others would consider repulsive. Amélie is confused and disgusted by Melvin’s belief that he is creating art by becoming obese. Because Amélie’s existence hinges on the importance of her role as an author and artist, she cannot tolerate anything that may devalue artistic contribution. Already needing Melvin’s affirmation of her importance her ego cannot tolerate the comparison. In the metadiscourse section following Melvin’s assertion of his art, Amélie discusses her reaction:

...si je comprenais son propos, j’éprouvais une vague malaise à l’idée qu’il assimile mes enfants d’encre et de papier à son tas de gras. Ce qu’il y a d’orgueil en moi voulut protester que j’écrivais dans l’ascèse et dans la faim, qu’il me fallait racler au plus profond de mes forces pour parvenir à cet acte suprême, et que grossir, même en de si formidables proportions, devait être moins éprouvant. (Nothomb, *Une forme* 67)

If one examines the first sentence of this passage, Nothomb presents Amélie’s celebration of her authorial act in contrast with Melvin’s weight gain. She refers to the difficult act of giving birth in relation to her creation of novels, her “enfants d’encre” and then derisively mentions Melvin’s heap of fat as a point of comparison. His claim that his weight gain is a work of art in the same sense that her novels are works of art offends Amélie’s artistic sensibility. Thus far, she has maintained a superior position over Melvin in her ability to create art. Melvin has typically put down his abilities as a writer, and he explicitly states that he has no real talent. Amélie has in turn been able to fortify her own narcissism with his constant praise from a lesser position. Because he develops confidence through his letters to Amélie, Melvin begins to assert his artist

status. Their epistolary exchange has been predicated upon his low self-esteem, and when he begins to see artistic value in his “*œuvre*,” despite its ridiculous nature, he threatens Amélie. Her authorial insecurity surfaces when Melvin compares his “artistic” creation to hers; like Melvin, Amélie’s selfhood is closely tied to her authorial act. As she feels devalued by the ridiculousness of his comparison, she questions her own work.

However, she eventually decides to encourage his “art” because it legitimizes her important role in his development as an artist. He is not successful without her. Using a photograph of Melvin that he had sent to her, she works to find a host for his art. While she does help, her naked disgust for Melvin and his obese body shows through her purportedly “good” intentions. Looking at the photo, Amélie describes what she perceives as his grotesque appearance and relishes the opportunity to closely examine and insult him. In one particularly biting comment, she states: “Le sexe de cette tumeur n’était pas identifiable” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 111). Several pages later, she also refers to him as “cette amibe obèse” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 117). Two examples among many, these comments belie her true feelings about her correspondent. Until this point, she has written to him with a veneer of concern, and she has been able to maintain this false image in her metadiscursive responses to his letters. However, when confronted with the photograph, she becomes condescending. As her character double and correspondent, Amélie has narcissistically introjected Melvin as a love object. This object absorption presents Amélie with significant problems due to her own contentious relationship with her body. Upon seeing Melvin’s obese form, she projects her disgust with herself onto him.

Despite her violent reaction to his photo, Amélie continues to help and write to Melvin. Eventually, she informs him that she had found a “gallery” in Brussels that would display photographs of his “art” based on the political statement of Melvin’s obesity revolt in the

American army. The word “gallery,” like the word “art” appears in quotation marks because Amélie openly admits that the space owned by her friend Cullus is not a typical gallery: “Cullus accepta la proposition avec enthousiasme et me demanda de lui épeler l’identité du soldat pour l’ajouter à son catalogue. Je m’exécutai en réprimant une envie de rire parce que le catalogue en question était une ardoise sur laquelle la liste des bières était inscrite à gauche et la liste des artistes à droite” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 101). Despite the laughable situation and the lack of pedigree, Amélie attempts to promote the gallery as much as possible. Melvin excitedly accepts her proposition. In turn, this becomes another opportunity for her to mock his “art” by noting how low the gallery is; in comparison with her published works of art, Melvin’s project seems pathetic. However, the gallery owner Cullus requests an additional photograph of Melvin in his army uniform to take the political commentary of the obese soldier fighting in Iraq to an entirely new level. Amélie passes on this request to Melvin and receives no response in return. Amélie is initially not concerned by the silence. However, she eventually becomes obsessed with Melvin. She states:

Mi-juillet, sans nouvelles de Melvin Mapple, je commençais à froncer les sourcils. L’Américain avait-il pensé que je n’avais pas assez commenté la photo? Un tel narcissisme ne lui ressemblait pas. Ou lui était-il difficile de trouver un bon portrait de lui en soldat pour Cullus? On ne lui demandait pas une chef d’œuvre.

Dans cet esprit, je lui écrivis derechef pour lui préciser qu’une photo très simple ferait l’affaire. Je me montrai amicale, en quoi j’étais sincère: notre échange me manquait.

Aucune réponse. Je partis en vacances, en priant mon éditeur de faire suivre le courrier. J’emportai toutes les lettres de l’Américain: les relire m’inspira de la nostalgie. Je pointai les noms de ses compagnons: pourrais-je écrire à Plumpy, à Bozo ? (Nothomb, *Une forme* 122)

Upon receiving no response to her first letter to Melvin requesting another picture, Amélie writes a second time and attempts to mask her desperation. While confused by Melvin’s odd behavior in earlier letters, Amélie misses the narcissistic gratification that she feels in Melvin’s pressing need to communicate with her. As Melvin has worked to construct an identity through the self-

reflective act of writing about himself to Amélie, she has also engaged in the construction of an identity based on Melvin's portrayal of her as a source of guidance and understanding.

This obsession with Melvin's silence causes Amélie to reach out to people who may be able to help her find out what may have happened to him; she writes to her editor in search of a contact in the American army. Her editor responds with an address in Iraq for a Howard Mapple. Amélie writes to him and actually receives a response: "Une dizaine de jours plus tard, mon cœur battit plus fort à la vue d'une enveloppe à mon nom, en tout point semblable, écriture comprise, à celle de Melvin Mapple. 'Je vais enfin savoir ce qui lui est arrivé,' pensai-je, heureuse de renouer le fil avec cet ami. Le moins qu'on puisse dire est que le courrier me surprit..." (Nothomb, *Une forme* 130). Whereas Amélie has kept Melvin at arms' length throughout the exchange by revealing relatively little about herself, she reveals in this passage that she considers him a friend. However, as she mentions in the final sentence, the epistolary friendship that had developed falls apart after the letter that she receives from Howard. Howard's response reads:

Miss,

Cessez de me faire chier avec vos conneries. Je ne dois plus rien à cet enculé de Melvin. Vous n'avez qu'à lui écrire à Baltimore, à l'adresse...

Et maintenant, foutez-moi la paix. (Nothomb, *Une forme* 130)

As one can easily see from this short missive, Amélie has not written to Melvin; she is now writing to a man who writes a letter full of abrupt statements and curse words. Shattering the illusion created by Melvin, this letter shares a common handwriting and came in an identical envelope as those preceding it.

Amélie decides to use Melvin's address in Baltimore and attempt to get some answers. Knowing that Howard is not the person she knew before despite the common handwriting and envelope, she writes to Melvin and receives the following response:

Chère Amélie,

J'avais décidé à ne plus vous écrire. Votre lettre me stupéfie: comment pouvez-vous ne pas m'en vouloir? Je m'attendais à pire que des reproches. N'avez-vous pas encore compris que je ne mérite pas votre amitié?

Sincèrement,

Melvin,

Baltimore, le 21/01/2010 (Nothomb, *Une forme* 130)

This letter appears written in a different yet still generically American script in an envelope with a stars and stripes stamp. She notes: "Je postai ce mot puis relus le billet du soldat...Son écriture avait changé" (Nothomb, *Une forme* 137). This metadiscursive response includes Amélie's first allusion to a letter's appearance now that Amélie is finally writing directly to Melvin; Amélie insists upon the veracity of the newly re-established exchange based on the description of the American's letter. However, the previous letters had appeared authentic; yet their contents were anything but. Through this subterfuge, Nothomb has highlighted the falsity of the epistolary exchange. Historically purported to be a narrative form with a basis in reality (claims of the letters from *Lettres portugaises* being real, for instance), Nothomb emphasizes the constructed nature of the text. In revealing the lies in Melvin's letters, Nothomb takes the first of many steps to undermine her own text.

Because Amélie has invested so much time and energy into her exchange with Melvin, she does not want to relinquish the connection. Her narcissistic self-understanding is dependent upon his letters. He is a love object for her, and thus, she must maintain her connection to him to avoid losing a love object and enduring the subsequent blow to her ego. Amélie writes back to Melvin and states that she wants to continue their correspondence. While Melvin's narrative has

appeared sad even as he has worked to entertain Amélie with his stories, this first letter that he writes in their new exchange demonstrates his own sufferings with melancholia. My interpretation here centers on his use of the word “reproches” and his expectation that Amélie would berate him. As a melancholic, he projects his own self-reproach onto the author and also in turn later criticizes her for continuing to write to him. In this cyclical process, he is able to perpetuate his pathological difficulties and maintain his compulsions to eat and to lie. When Melvin responds to Amélie’s messages with his true story, he matter-of-factly describes his difficulties with obesity after his attempts to become the new Jack Kerouac. In this more realistic story, Melvin mentions that his parents gave him a computer in an effort to give him some direction. He designs a website for their gas station and then slowly finds other work creating sites for other businesses in the neighborhood. However, this work further separates him from other human beings, and he begins to gain weight in his isolation. Despite sharing meals with him, his parents do not notice at first: “Lorsque j’ai atteint les 130 kilos, ma mère m’a dit avec stupéfaction ‘Tu es gros!’ J’ai répondu que j’étais obèse. ‘Pourquoi n’ai-je rien vu jusqu’à présent?’ a-t-elle crié. Parce que je m’étais laissé pousser la barbe qui cachait mon triple menton. Je me suis rasé et j’ai découvert le visage d’un inconnu que je suis resté” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 153). Because Melvin is a double of Amélie, certain aspects of his experience mirror hers. While Amélie’s parents are not an integral part of *Une forme de vie*, the lack of attention that Melvin receives from his parents is parallel to baby Amélie’s early life in *Métaphysique des tubes*. Melvin’s parents do not see him and have helped him isolate himself in their garage, and thus, he does not receive any ego confirmation. Having finally noticed his weight gain, Melvin’s parents give him an ultimatum: “Mes parents m’ont ordonné de maigrir. J’ai refusé. ‘Puisque c’est comme ça, nous ne te recevrons plus à table. Nous ne voulons pas être témoins de ton

suicide...” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 153). In a scene that parallels Amélie’s confrontations with her mother about her sugar addiction, Melvin refuses to be the dutiful son. Amélie’s own reaction differs significantly from that of Melvin, and she perhaps wishes that she could have been as firm in asserting her desires. His refusal comes at the expense of human contact, and Melvin states that the only people he ever sees are those who deliver his takeout food. It is from loneliness that he decides to write to Amélie. Having been rejected by his parents, Melvin seeks a mirror to use in his self-construction, and an epistolary exchange with a favorite author initially seems to be an outlet for his own need for narcissistic gratification and support.

IV. Mythomania

Melvin states that he originally planned to only send one letter to Amélie: “J’avais pensé vous envoyer une ou deux lettres, pas plus. Je ne m’attendais pas à votre enthousiasme, ni au mien. Très vite, cet échange est devenu la chose la plus importante de ma vie où, faut-il le préciser, il n’y a pas grand-chose. Je ne me sentais pas capable de vous dire la vérité” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 139). Upon hearing back from her, his intention changes as her letter bolsters his fragile ego. He is as hungry for objects to introject as Amélie, a fact that is proven by his own compulsive consumption. Melvin reveals his lies now that he no longer has to pretend to be someone different to get Amélie’s attention. He is merely a lonely man who has no friends other than Amélie. He explains how he manufactured the situation by blackmailing his soldier brother Howard into helping. In the subsequent pages, Amélie discovers that Melvin had been sending his letters through his brother Howard, a soldier stationed in Baghdad, so that they would have the appropriate appearance. Melvin’s desperate statements mirror those made by Amélie when she reveals how the exchange filled a certain void in her life because she is equally as lonely.

Whereas most people would be incensed by the lies that Melvin had told from the beginning of their correspondence, Amélie only becomes more intrigued. In response to Melvin's letter revealing himself, she composes her longest letter yet. Trading her normally distant requests for more information about Melvin for a tone that implies friendship and intimacy, her response bears a close resemblance to the sections of metadiscourse that appear outside of the exchange. As if freed by realizing that Melvin's entire identity had been a fiction, she tries to comfort him: "Si cela peut vous rassurer, vous êtes loin d'être le premier mythomane qui s'adresse à moi... Tout écrivain contient un escroc, c'est donc en tant que collègue que je vous tire mon chapeau." (Nothomb 145). Amélie openly proclaims Melvin to be her author colleague; through his series of false letters, Melvin constructed a story that has implications and connections with Amélie's narcissistic fictional productions. Indeed, she also states that all authors are also swindlers. Nothomb also comments on her own situation in as she refers to authors as swindlers. As she has created her personal mythology through her novels and interviews, she has made it impossible to discern the truth about her life. Like Melvin, Nothomb creates the existence that she wants. In addition, the word "escroc"/"swindler" has clear financial connotations. As an author, Nothomb publishes her works each year during the *rentrée*, and because of the pattern of similar themes, it seems as if Nothomb is repeatedly publishing the same work. Is she swindling her readers by doing this and continuing to profit from it or is she merely a compulsive mythomaniac like Melvin?

As she describes in her metadiscourse about her own correspondence with her grandfather, exaggeration is a necessary part of epistolarity. In reference to Nothomb's tendency to ascribe to this manner of thinking, Mark D. Lee discusses: "l'efficacité sinon la nécessité du mensonge dans la création d'une identité" (149). For both Amélie and Melvin, the letter

represents a perfect space for an identity based on a lie; Melvin becomes a soldier serving his country, and Amélie maintains the image of an author concerned with the well-being of others. In fact, Amélie comments on the veracity of epistolary identity: “Je m’insurge: pourquoi les individus seraient-ils forcément plus vrais quand on les a en face de soi? Pourquoi leur vérité n’apparaîtrait-elle pas mieux, ou tout simplement différemment, dans l’épître?” (Nothomb 107-108)³⁹. This need to create a new identity through the epistolary gesture also indicates a need to avoid the realities of one’s own life. As narcissism is a manifestation of melancholia and mania, I contend that the novel’s pervasive mythomania also plays a significant role. In redefining oneself as something other than what one is, it is also possible to bolster the fragile ego. Melvin’s expresses his narcissistic need in the tendency to lie and to seek affirmation from others based on these lies.

Amongst Melvin’s elaborate series of falsehoods, he tells a story that becomes a metaphor for the entire text. Several letters into the exchange, he describes his relationship with a woman that he has imagined is in the fat around his midsection: “Schéhérazade.” For a man whose loneliness caused him to reach out in an epistolary gesture to a person with whom he had no prior contact, the act of creating a relationship with an imaginary girlfriend is entirely plausible. Melvin describes their relationship to Amélie as follows: “Elle me parle des nuits entières. Elle sait que je ne peux plus faire l’amour, alors elle remplace cet acte par de belles histoires qui me charment. Je vous confie mon secret: c’est grâce à la fiction de Schéhérazade que je supporte mon obésité” (Nothomb 30). Like Schéhérazade, Melvin creates an imaginary relationship with Amélie before he begins writing to her. Melvin stated that he has read all of

³⁹ Throughout the novel, Nothomb switches the words that she uses to refer to letters. At certain points, she prefers the more antiquated terms “épître” and “missive” to the more typical “lettre.” I read these alternative terms as another attempt in Nothomb’s part to assert her knowledge of the epistolary arts and establish herself as a premier letter writer.

Amélie's seventeen novels, and thus, he is also using her writing to fill the void in his life. As Melvin exists as a mirror and double of Amélie, Schéhérazade also serves as her double. Though she does not exist, Schéhérazade is a confidant for Melvin, and her image fascinates Amélie. She writes to Melvin with enthusiasm to hear more about his relationship: "Merci pour votre stupéfiante missive que je viens de lire et relire avec ahurissement et émerveillement... Puis-je vous prier, Schéhérazade et vous, de me raconter encore et encore cette histoire? Je n'ai jamais rien lu de pareil" (Nothomb 32). This enthusiasm indicates a clear shift from Amélie's earlier questioning of whether or not she wanted to develop any sort of written relationship with Melvin. Soon after Melvin introduces Schéhérazade, Amélie states: "C'est avec fièvre que j'attendis la prochaine épître de Melvin" (Nothomb 33). Having become fascinated with Melvin's imaginary relationship with Schéhérazade, Amélie feels an increased interest in Melvin. Seeing his potential as a storyteller, Amélie briefly wants to align herself with him; as an enthusiast of quality literature, Amélie wants Melvin to continue his story.

An allusion to the classic of world literature *One Thousand and One Nights*, Schéhérazade marries the Persian king who marries a new virgin every day only to execute her the following morning. In an effort to preserve her own life, Schéhérazade begins to tell the king an enthralling story, but intentionally tells only part of the story by dawn. He allows her to live an additional day so that she can finish the story the following night. She begins a different and even more exciting story that night, and once again, she only finishes a portion of it. Once again, the king allows her to live to see the next day. This pattern continues for nine hundred and ninety nine more nights. During this time period, the king falls in love with Schéhérazade and the couple have three children together. In Richard F. Burton's translation of the stories, Schéhérazade's description reads:

[Shahrazad] had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by gone men and things; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred. (Burton 14)

This description resembles Nothomb's constructed version of her character and her authorly image; Schéhérazade, like Amélie and the author, has spent a significant amount of time studying. Both are accomplished storytellers capable of complex intertextual references. Also like Nothomb, Schéhérazade's knowledge of these vast texts help her to create a viable existence. In the context of this work and the autofictional Amélie, the character engenders her identity through the act of being an author. Considering that Nothomb has described writing as a "pathology," both she and her characters feel absolutely compelled to write. Without the written word, the author and her fictional self would cease to exist. Like Schéhérazade, Melvin and Amélie's continued existence is dependent upon her storytelling. Through the humorous mask that the two have created in the exchange, they have been able to assuage their melancholic responses through manic and narcissistic interpretations. However, while Melvin's mask is removed through the truths in his final letters, Amélie does not remove her mask until the novel's final two pages.

In the twenty pages following Melvin's revelation, Amélie and Melvin continue to exchange letters, but the reader feels increasingly ill at ease with the relationship. While she initially states that his mythomania is far from the worst that she has encountered, she also alludes in her metadiscourse to him being mentally ill. However, she eventually decides to help her friend by visiting him in Baltimore. During the flight to the United States, Amélie can no longer hide the apprehension she feels at the possibility of meeting Melvin. In a conversation that she has with herself, her other voice questions: "Amélie Nothomb, peux-tu me dire ce que tu es

en train de faire?” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 164). Pathetically, she responds that she is an adult who is going to visit a friend in the United States. The voice reproaches her: “Mais non! La vérité, c’est que tu n’as pas change depuis l’âge de 8 ans: tu te crois investée de pouvoirs mystérieux, tu t’imagines que tu vas toucher Melvin et qu’il sera guéri de son obésité!” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 164). In comparison with Nothomb’s other narratives, these self-accusations show clarity about Amélie’s narcissism. Rather than pretending that it is not a determining factor in her decision, Amélie’s other voice finally asserts the pathological nature of her grandiose thoughts. The voice’s accusations continue: “Tu vas rencontrer un programmeur qui, depuis dix ans, n’a adressé la parole qu’au livreur de pizzas... Ce type est malade et toi, tu es encore plus malade puisque tu vas chez lui” (Nothomb, *Une forme* 166). This rare glimpse of self-understanding also indicates that Melvin is not the only mentally ill character; while Amélie has pitied him, she has been behaving in an equally unhealthy manner. The epistolary exchange does not serve to confirm the self; the correspondence merely confirms false pretenses and lies.

In Melvin’s final letter to Amélie before her trip to Baltimore, he writes about the important role that their exchange has played in his otherwise lonely life. While Melvin has lied about the events of his life, his statements about his emotions are sincere. He re-asserts his need for her:

J’ai obtenu qu’Howard m’envoie toutes vos lettres. Quelle émotion de les voir en vrai, de les toucher. J’ai imprimé mes courriers que j’avais archivés et j’ai constitué un dossier avec la succession de nos messages. Savez-vous comment j’ai intitulé ce classeur? “Une forme de vie.” Ça m’est venu instinctivement. Quand je repense à cette dizaine de mois pendant lesquels j’ai correspondu avec vous, moi qui ne vivais plus depuis près de dix ans, cette expression s’est imposée: grâce à vous, j’ai eu accès à une forme de vie. (Nothomb, *Une forme* 157)

Through his letter writing experience, Melvin has built up significant self-confidence; as he collects the correspondence, he performs actions similar to those of the “editors” of letter texts

from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as he amasses the significant exchange that has taken place. He even comes up with a title for collection, and this title becomes the title of Nothomb's novel. Melvin completes his cycle of becoming an author, and despite his repeated assertions of his need for Amélie, it becomes clear that he no longer needs her because he has become an author in his own right.

As the novel's end, Nothomb has Amélie revert back to a position in which she does not analyze her actions. Feeling uncomfortable at the possibility of moving on from the compulsive fictionalizing of her autobiography, Nothomb has Amélie engage in the self destructive act of reporting that she is a terrorist on her customs form. Having revealed Melvin as a phony, Nothomb seeks to do the same for his mirrored character, Amélie. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller offers a theory that is instructive in our understanding of Nothomb's character destruction and its relationship to her epistolarity. Miller argues: "That probably greatest of narcissistic wounds – not to have been loved just as one truly was – cannot heal without the work of mourning. It can either be more or less successfully resisted and covered up (as in grandiosity and depression), or constantly torn open again in the compulsion to repeat" (Miller 85). Because of the narcissistic wounds that occurred during her childhood, Amélie seeks an outlet for a need to re-create herself in order to be loved as she truly is. In *Une forme de vie*, this need to re-imagine the self is at its most prominent. Because of her pathological need to write, Nothomb undermines her characters in order to begin rewriting them in other forms in her future novels. By writing an epistolary novel, Nothomb was able to create and dismantle two characters rather than one, and in the process, she further perpetuated the melancholic struggles that she portrays in her works.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I have endeavored to study the patterns of a narrative form and its psychological implications. As contemporary Francophone authors have begun reviving the letter genre, the authors have shown the influence of works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries while also integrating more modern theories about narrative and the self. The authors rejected many typical stylistic markers of epistolary texts; however, despite this rejection, these modern texts have clear thematic connections with their predecessors. The three authors that I have explored in this project have combined several types of epistolary narrative: the one-sided letter, the melancholic lament, and the exiled letters addressed to a “home.” Continuing the conversation about epistolarity after the supposed decline of the genre, these marginalized authors have found a form that reflects their experiences in exile.

In the first chapter, I examined Gisèle Pineau’s use of the epistolary form in *L’Exil selon Julia* and her transformation of the letter narrative into something entirely her own that combined poetic prose, oral literature, and diary-like letters. The characters of Man Ya and the narrator struggle under the pressures of diaspora and exile, and neither feels at home in France during the several years that the family spends there. During the time that each spend in exile in France, Man Ya and the narrator experience significant racial prejudice and are consistently reminded that they are “Other.” Because of French racism, the narrator suffers extensive damage to her ego and descends into a state of melancholia. Man Ya’s troubles began before she emigrated to France as her mother, her abusive husband, and others labeled her “la plus laide négresse noire” and repeatedly affirmed her inferiority because of her dark skin. While exiled in France, Man Ya composes oral prayers or “letters” to God that lament her troubled life. Both Man Ya and the narrator long for the Antilles and make frequent mental trips to an idealized version of the

Caribbean homeland. Man Ya and the narrator use letters and these mental trips in an attempt to assuage the melancholia that life away from the islands causes.

In the second chapter, I analyze Linda Lê's consistent use of epistolarity in her novels and its relationship to her characters' melancholia. Lê first uses the epistolary narrative form in her 1992 short story "Vinh L." in *Les évangiles du crime* and continues to use the form until as recently as 2010's *Cronos*. While her themes vary to a certain degree, Lê creates a clear association between letters and the father. She demonstrates this association by writing epistolary narratives that prominently feature a father-figure and by also depicting her characters' obsession with the father-figure's letters in non-epistolary narratives. Additionally, Lê's protagonists struggle in their exile; unlike Man Ya and Pineau's narrator, Lê's protagonists experience a troubled relationship with their homeland. The letter, the father, and the homeland come together to form a melancholic *mise en abyme* for Lê that continually reflects back ego damage and trauma. While Lê constantly explores epistolarity in her corpus, her use of the genre reaches its apex in *Lettre morte*. Lê has maintained a fruitful and productive literary career by repeating and recycling similar images, but this repetition also means that Lê never resolves the problematic relationship between her characters, the father, the letter, and the homeland. Rather, she uses this obsessive examination as a reason to continue writing. *Lettre morte* is simultaneously an inner monologue, a journal, and a letter, and Lê's engagement with these three forms is a striking contribution to contemporary epistolarity.

In the third chapter, I discussed Amélie Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* and her efforts to construct another self by fictionalizing autobiography. Nothomb often hides behind the defense mechanisms of humor and sarcasm, but her characters reveal feelings of hopelessness and a desire for self-destruction. Nothomb's works comprise a vicious cycle in which she obsessively

revisits images that pertain to the body, the act of writing, and national identity. Of the three novels in this project, Nothomb's novel is the sole example that contains an exchange. However, unlike in epistolary novels like *Les liaisons dangereuses*, the written conversation between fictional Amélie and Melvin Mapple is a dialogue between two sides of one self. Amélie and Melvin support each other's narcissistic need for affirmation. By the end of the novel, however, this affirmation is no longer enough, and both characters succumb to a desire to destroy the selves that they had created.

As we expand our definitions of epistolarity to include novels that are not overtly in letter form, it is possible to discover ways that contemporary authors are working to redefine the genre. In later projects, I would like to expand my exploration of marginalized women's epistolary narratives into British, American, and Canadian literature. During my research, I encountered several interesting letter novels by Anglophone authors like Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, and I would like to have the opportunity to further analyze the thematic convergences between these narratives and those from the Francophone world that I have written about in this project. The transnational nature of letters merits a conversation about modern epistolarity that crosses all borders, including those of nationality and of language.

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VITA

Rosemary Courville was born on August 27 to Kevin and Toni Harrington. At the age of one, Rosie moved to Columbus, GA, the city where she would grow up. Three years after this move, Rosie's younger brother Robert was born in 1988. Rosie attended Columbus High School and graduated in 2002. While at Columbus High, Rosie discovered her passion for African American literature and for the French language and culture.

After high school, she enrolled at Wesleyan College in Macon, GA. During the summer between her sophomore and junior years, she studied abroad in Paris, and because of this experience, she decided that she wanted to continue her education by attending graduate school in French. Rosie graduated *cum laude* from Wesleyan in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and French. In Fall 2006, Rosie moved to Baton Rouge to begin the program in the Department of French Studies at Louisiana State University. In May 2009, she received her Master of Arts in French after completing her thesis, "Rejecting the Epistolary Woman: Modern Female Protagonists in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Ying Chen's *Les lettres chinoises*." After having completed her doctoral coursework and general examinations, Rosie spent the 2010-2011 academic year in Liège, Belgium, where she learned of the beauty that is French fries and mayonnaise. While in Belgium, Rosie made significant progress on her dissertation due to a generous scholarship from Wallonie-Bruxelles International. In September 2011, Rosie had the best weekend of her life when she married Keith in front of family and friends in Baton Rouge. During the year following her return from Belgium, Rosie came to the realization that she did not have a passion for research and university-level teaching and applied for Teach for America in 2013. She was accepted and will begin teaching high school English in August 2013.