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‘Des fils invisibles nous reliant’: Comparative Memory in Caribbean Life-Writing

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This article contributes to debates on comparative approaches to the memory of the Holocaust and Atlantic slavery. It examines comparisons between colonial and Second World War histories in the *récits d’enfance* by three French-speaking Caribbean writers, Patrick Chamoiseau, Gisèle Pineau and Maryse Condé. It argues that because there are significant difficulties involved in approaching the Caribbean’s colonial history directly, these authors approach it obliquely through the more recent history of the Second World War. The comparative approaches of these literary texts anticipate events in the public sphere such as the 2001 recognition by the French government of slavery as a crime against humanity or Nicolas Sarkozy’s failed 2008 proposal that every French school child should be assigned one of the child victims of the Holocaust to remember. Attention to these comparative approaches is valuable because it points to connections between literature, collective memory and public policy and brings to light the multiple, intersecting histories at play in the French-speaking world. The article concludes by examining the ways in which literary language allows these authors to foreground the linguistic and imaginative processes which create links between separate historical events while maintaining a sense of their difference.

Memory, history, slavery, Caribbean, Holocaust, Second World War, childhood

Cet article contribue aux débats qui portent sur les approches comparatives de l'histoire de la Shoah et de l'esclavage. Il examine des comparaisons entre les histoires de la colonisation et celles de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale à travers l'étude de trois textes écrits en français par des auteurs antillais, Patrick Chamoiseau, Gisèle Pineau et Maryse Condé. L'article affirme que puisque l'articulation directe de l'histoire de l'esclavage aux Antilles pose des difficultés importantes, ces auteurs l'abordent par le biais de l'histoire plus récente de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Ces comparaisons littéraires anticipent des démarches gouvernementales, telles que la Loi Taubira de 2001, qui reconnaît l'esclavage comme crime contre l'humanité, ou le projet de Nicolas Sarkozy sur le parrainage des enfants de la Shoah qui a été proposé en 2008. L'étude des approches comparatives de ces auteurs met en évidence les liens entre la littérature, la mémoire collective et la politique, et fait voir l'imbrication des histoires multiples du monde francophone. L'article se clôt sur une exploration des façons dont le langage littéraire permet à ces auteurs d'attirer l'attention sur des processus linguistiques et créatifs qui peuvent établir des liens entre des événements historiques séparés sans perdre de vue leurs différences.

La mémoire, l'histoire, l'esclavage, les Antilles, la Shoah, la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, l'enfance

The last decade of the twentieth century saw a boom in autobiographical writings by French-speaking Caribbean authors. Authors from Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti all produced *révits d'enfance*, including Patrick Chamoiseau's three-volume *Une enfance créole*, Maryse Condé's *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance*, Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia*, Raphaël Confiant's *Ravines du devant-jour* and Dany Laferrière's *Le Charme des*

après-midi sans fin.<sup>1</sup> Maeve McCusker traces this boom to the anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of the Caribbean islands and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery, which drew attention to the gaps and aporias in Caribbean history.<sup>2</sup> The *récits d’enfance* that emerged from the 1990s onwards raise questions about how to narrate an individual life in the light of histories of colonial violence and slavery. McCusker describes the moment when the child learns about slavery as playing the role of ‘a haunting primal scene’ and ‘a powerful absence-presence’.<sup>3</sup> Louise Hardwick goes on to develop the concept of the ‘scene of recognition’ in this body of texts. It occurs when the child asks a parent about some aspect of contemporary reality which only makes sense in the context of slavery, only to have the question rebuffed with an embarrassed silence.<sup>4</sup> The repetition of such moments teaches the child that the history of slavery cannot be articulated. Such interactions, ‘when the societal impulse towards repression is experienced, noticed and questioned by the child, disrupt the fabric of the child’s world’.<sup>5</sup> Slavery is a missed history which can be neither understood nor spoken of directly, but which enters the child’s consciousness through charged silences and fragmentary speech. The encounter with the history of slavery has significant force in the child’s life. Though distant in time it is apprehended through the near silences of parents. It fails to be transmitted both within the family, where its memory is not passed on, and in the wider social world, as colonial history is not taught at school and the child encounters few if any forms of public remembrance addressing the origins of Caribbean societies.

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Louise Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 8 in terming these texts *récits d’enfance* to allow for their merging of autobiographical and fictional elements and their particular focus on childhood.

<sup>2</sup> Maeve McCusker, ‘“Troubler l’ordre de l’oubli”: Memory and Forgetting in French Caribbean Autobiography of the 1990s’, *Forum of Modern Language Studies*, 40 (2004), 438–50 (p. 439).

<sup>3</sup> McCusker, pp. 441–443.

<sup>4</sup> Hardwick, pp. 16–22.

<sup>5</sup> Hardwick, p. 17.

In what follows I argue that slavery's status as a missed history leads Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau to forge links between the memory of slavery and that of the Second World War in their *récits d'enfance*. Because slavery is so difficult to approach directly, it must be approached indirectly, and one example of such an indirect approach is to write towards slavery through the more recent history of the Second World War and in particular that of the Holocaust. The Holocaust's dual association with what Roger Luckhurst calls 'narrative impossibility' and 'narrative possibility' mean it is a valuable, if fraught, road into a consideration of other violent episodes of modernity.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, the Nazi genocide is a paradigmatic example of a historical event that cannot be satisfactorily narrated. At times, these authors draw on this connection between the Holocaust and narrative impossibility to gesture towards the difficulties of recounting the history and legacy of slavery. Yet as they do so they participate in the paradoxical narrative possibility associated with the Holocaust, which continues to generate study and creation in a wide range of media and genres even as it is defined as an un-representable event. As Maeve McCusker notes, '[t]he paradigmatic status of the Holocaust [...] means that it figures at once as impetus and touchstone for the contemporary upsurge of interest in memory'.<sup>7</sup> Though historians and literary critics have expressed understandable ethical concerns about comparisons of the Holocaust to other historical events, modes of comparison which assume the events in question are not entirely knowable avoid the ethical risks of competitive victimhood.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of comparison are at work in the *récits d'enfance* by Chamoiseau, Condé and Pineau. It is rare for these authors to situate the Holocaust as causing a certain amount of suffering, which could then be compared to the suffering caused by Atlantic slavery. Rather,

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Maeve McCusker, *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 124.

comparisons are made in a mode which assumes an unknowable infinity of suffering was caused by both events. The purpose of this article is to explore the various ways in which these authors create comparisons between Second World War and colonial violence without fixing the meaning of either, and the implications of such comparisons for understandings of memory in the French-speaking world.

Attention to such comparisons is valuable because they form part of the history of the emergence of colonial memory and anti-colonial politics in French society. Comparisons between Jewish and Caribbean memory have a long history. Narratives of the Middle Passage often drew parallels between the forced migration of enslaved Africans and the exile of the Israelites.<sup>9</sup> After the Second World War, comparisons between Jewish and Caribbean experiences turned to the interplay of mobility and immobility in the experience of migration to Europe.<sup>10</sup> Histories of migration lie behind the Jewish and Caribbean presence in Europe, but living as an oppressed minority is strongly associated with immobility, experienced either through an inability to return 'home', or through literal confinement in ghettos, prisons and camps.<sup>11</sup> Echoes between Jewish and Caribbean experiences of Europe form part of the imaginative resources on which authors draw as they explore the migrations shaping the Caribbean past and present. Conceptual frameworks and theoretical vocabulary connected to the study of the Holocaust have also informed critical responses to Caribbean writing on memory, as the Holocaust was the primary focus of memory studies at its inception.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Toumson, 'Deux figures du destin', *Portulan*, 2 (1998), pp. 9-18.

<sup>10</sup> Celia Britton, *Language and Literary Form in French Caribbean Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Britton, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> McCusker, *Recovering Memory*, p. 4. McCusker draws on Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory', a term for the relationship to the Holocaust of children of survivors in her study of memory in the work of Patrick Chamoiseau.

Connections between colonial and Second World War memory also accompanied the emergence of opposition to the Algerian War, as Michael Rothberg has shown.<sup>13</sup>

Such comparative approaches are not confined to the sphere of literary creation and criticism; they inform public policy too. In 1999, the year Condé's *récit d'enfance* came out, the loi Taubira, which recognised slavery as a crime against humanity in 2001, was first proposed. Because the concept of a 'crime against humanity' was developed in the wake of the Second World War and Holocaust to account for the unprecedented nature of the Nazi genocide, this law is underpinned by an implicitly comparative approach.<sup>14</sup> One of the provisions of the law was the setting up of a *Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage*, which Condé would go on to chair in 2004. The literary comparisons Condé constructs in her writing on childhood thus resonate in laws passed by the French government, laws Condé herself helps implement. In Pineau's 1996 *L'Exil selon Julia*, the young protagonist, Julia, identifies with Anne Frank in a way that anticipates Nicolas Sarkozy's 2008 proposal that each French schoolchild be assigned to remember one of the eleven thousand children who died after being deported from France during the Second World War. Sarkozy's proposal was never carried out, largely because of fears of the emotional weight it would put on young children and opposition to the idea of making the Holocaust a private, emotional matter of empathy between individuals, rather than an event meriting historical study.<sup>15</sup> But Pineau's text offers a model of identification between two children which enables the protagonist to set her own experience

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<sup>13</sup> *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 6; p. 179.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Geras, *Crimes Against Humanity: Birth of a Concept* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. vi.

<sup>15</sup> Le Bars, Stéphanie, 'Le projet de parrainage d'enfants de la Shoah contesté', *Le Monde* (15 February 2009) < [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2008/02/15/le-projet-de-parrainage-d-enfants-de-la-shoah-conteste-par-stephanie-le-bars\\_1011787\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2008/02/15/le-projet-de-parrainage-d-enfants-de-la-shoah-conteste-par-stephanie-le-bars_1011787_823448.html) > [accessed 29 February 2016].

of discrimination in a broader, political context. The process of identification with another child's pain in fact lightens her emotional burden rather than causing her further suffering. Examining the specificities of the literary comparisons Condé, Pineau and Chamoiseau make between colonial and Second World War histories offers one way of thinking through the relationship between literary meaning, collective memory and public policy.

Paying attention to these comparative movements can also help move the critic towards a renewed conception of the relationship between memory and national space. Examining the way memory moves in these texts has implications for the way readers and critics conceive of the Francosphere. The particular ways in which these authors create links between the Second World War and colonial histories assumes a French-speaking world which is not a bounded whole but is rather a place of multiple intersecting trajectories.<sup>16</sup> To look at these authors' portrayal of childhood and memory is to zoom in on a particular entanglement created by these intersecting paths. The trajectories in question arise out of patterns of employment which carry twentieth-century Antilleans to metropolitan France, to Africa and back to the Caribbean. Such journeys are not one-way but can be conducted multiple times in both directions. As the children's parents make such journeys, or refuse to make them, the child comes to a dim awareness of the forced ancestral journey from Africa to the Caribbean and of the implications of that journey for the contemporary relationship between France and its overseas territories. Here, memory does not serve to reinforce an individual or group identity. Still less is it contained by the borders of a nation-state. Rather, memory travels to create unpredictable links between one life and another. Close readings of Chamoiseau's *Une*

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<sup>16</sup> I am drawing here on the two models of imperial history outlined by Alan Lester in 'Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 4 (2006), 124–141 (p. 135).



enfance créole, Condé's *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance* and Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* will offer concrete examples of such travelling forms of memory.

Chamoiseau was the first of these authors to write a *récit d'enfance*, with his 1990 *Antan d'enfance*, an oneiric exploration of early childhood consciousness in mid-1950s Martinique. This was followed in 1994 by *Chemin-d'école*, which narrates the author's traumatic entry into the educational system, his forced acquisition of French, and his early explorations of reading and writing. In *A bout d'enfance*, the third volume of his autobiography, Chamoiseau meditates on the deaths of his parents and explores both his own memories of them and those he has absorbed from his older siblings. In this volume, he writes about an opportunity his father was given to work in metropolitan France. This happened before Chamoiseau was born so he knows about it through his older sister's memories. When his father is offered the opportunity, he turns it down, to the great disappointment of his wife and daughter, who were anticipating a new life in the métropole. This is how Chamoiseau describes his father's response to his family's objections to his decision to stay in Martinique:

le Papa se vit donc assaillir de récriminations et de doutes malveillants sur les hauteurs de son courage. Longtemps, il fut incapable de répliquer une bonne raison à ses persécutrices. Un jour, avant de se murer dans un silence définitif, il finit par déclarer que ces pays d'Europe avaient engendré les guerres apocalyptiques, les tranchées, les gaz, Hitler, Mussolini, les camps de concentration, les massacres coloniaux, la bombe, le twist, Jack l'éventreur..., donc que ces lieux n'étaient de toute évidence pas complètement civilisés...<sup>17</sup>

By beginning this list with First and then Second World War histories and then moving on to 'les massacres coloniaux', Chamoiseau prepares the reader to see a meaningful relationship between the extent of the violence wreaked during those wars and that of the colonial project. The arguably less well-known and less widely acknowledged colonial histories are placed on

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *A bout d'enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 71–72.

the same level as the war histories which are publically remembered and studied within Europe. The accumulation of nouns referring to warfare, dictatorships, weapons and killers is used to reverse the usual opposition between civilised metropolitan centre and its unruly periphery. Yet the somewhat puzzling presence of the twist and Jack the Ripper within this list suggest that it is more than a simple reversal of the centre/periphery opposition. The mention of these two elements disrupts the sense that everything named in the list is of equal seriousness. Chamoiseau's father's list both sets up connections between war-time and colonial violence, and, through its Rabelaisian length and variety, destabilises those connections so that no fixed relationship is established between its different elements. It points towards the author's father's thorough knowledge and easy articulation of aspects of European history and culture which are publically remembered, and much less easy articulation of colonial histories, whose presence is confined to the general term, 'les massacres coloniaux'. What is remembered in public is also what is passed on within the family so that the memories created within the public sphere also become familial memories passed between generations. This dynamic, where violence that has occurred within European borders can be named more easily than colonial violence in the Americas is also present in Maryse Condé's 1999 collection of stories of childhood, *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance*.

Condé's *récit d'enfance* inhabits, as its subtitle indicates, an ambiguous space between autobiography and fiction. Its ludic engagement with the conventions of autobiographical writing is evident in the first of the brief sketches which compose it, 'Portrait de famille'. The title of this sketch situates the family as a source of narrative causation, a framework which will help the reader understand how the child develops. But the first lines of this story immediately undermine this expectation. They portray the family as the place where narrative

is absent, leaving the child struggling to understand how her life is connected to history more broadly. This is how the story and the work as a whole opens:

Si quelqu'un avait demandé à mes parents leur opinion sur la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, ils auraient répondu sans hésiter que c'était la période la plus sombre qu'ils aient jamais connu. Non pas à cause de la France coupée en deux, des camps de Drancy ou d'Auschwitz, de l'extermination de six millions de Juifs, ni de tous ces crimes contre l'humanité qui n'ont pas fini d'être payés, mais parce que pendant sept interminables années, ils avaient été privés de ce qui comptait le plus pour eux: leurs voyages en France.<sup>18</sup>

There are two kinds of movement at work in this passage. The first enacts the parents' desire to travel from Guadeloupe to France, as the passage begins with the Guadeloupean parents and ends with France. This kind of movement situates France as the stable object of the parents' desire and it is unidirectional. The second kind of movement is centrifugal, beginning within France and looking outwards in several directions. It draws on Second World War histories to disrupt the idea of France as a unitary, bounded whole. As we shall go on to examine, it is an obliquely comparative movement which allows the narrator to introduce resonances of colonial histories without referring to them directly. This centrifugal motion is present in the idea of the country 'coupée en deux', in the parallel established between the camps at Drancy and at Auschwitz, and in the reference to the Holocaust. The geographical opening of the idea of France takes place alongside the temporal opening present in 'tous ces crimes contre l'humanité qui n'ont pas fini d'être payés'. This phrase presents a tension between a movement towards and away from historical rootedness. Like the nouns 'Drancy', 'Auschwitz', 'l'extermination de six millions de Juifs', it roots the referent of the sentence in Second World War history. However, the pluralisation of this noun

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<sup>18</sup> Maryse Condé, *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999), p. 11.

and its extension into the present through ‘n’ont pas fini d’être payés’ simultaneously uproots it from its specific historical context, creating an uncanny appearance of the historical within the contemporary. As discussed earlier, this movement from one context to another of the phrase ‘crimes contre l’humanité’ was also taking place in the French legislature with the introduction of the loi Taubira in the same year Condé’s text was published. The reference to ‘tous ces crimes contre l’humanité qui n’ont pas fini d’être payés’, though ostensibly connected with Second World War histories, comes to resonate with later attempts by the French government to come to terms with the history of slavery.

Just as the French government drew on a concept developed in the wake of the Second World War to begin to engage with the history of slavery, so Condé, in the opening of her récit *d’enfance*, moves from Second World War histories to France’s colonial past. In the sentence following the passage quoted above, the narrator writes of her parents: ‘Pour eux, la France n’était nullement le siège du pouvoir colonial’.<sup>19</sup> It seems that this is key to understanding the parents’ relationship to France. Yet the narrator does not choose to present this fact first. Rather, she proceeds towards it obliquely by mentioning other violent episodes in French history to which her parents are not connected. There is a fusion of form and content in these first two sentences, as Condé speaks of a pattern of avoidance by employing a structure of avoidance. Replicating this pattern of avoidance in her own language, the narrator demonstrates that this inherited silence runs through her own writing. The way the reader must be attentive to what is not said in these sentences leads her to share to a certain extent in an inarticulate awareness of something that cannot be spoken.

Both the Holocaust and slavery are present through their absence in this passage. Neither word is used and references to both enter into the text through structures of negation (‘Non

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<sup>19</sup> Condé, p. 11.

pas à cause de’, ‘Pour eux, la France n’était pas’). Even the negation does not have a positive presence as it is framed by a hypothetical construction (‘Si quelqu’un avait demandé’). These framing devices situate both the Holocaust and French colonial activity several steps beyond the parents’ active awareness. They avoid fixing the meaning of either period by emphasising that neither is easily known. As noted above, Michael Rothberg has written of the way comparisons between the Holocaust and French colonial violence facilitated the emergence of anti-colonial movement politics.<sup>20</sup> Here the narrator draws attention to the ways in which the denial of the history of French colonialism in her family also involved the occlusion of France’s role in the Holocaust. Though colonial and Holocaust histories differ in duration, nature and scope, both had to be denied by the generation preceding the narrator to maintain France as an object of desire, and both had to be explored by the following generation to unearth the meanings of the silences within the family.

These productive tensions between narrative possibility and impossibility are also at work in Gisèle Pineau’s *L’Exil selon Julia*. The family history of the protagonist, a young girl named Julia who recounts her experiences living in Africa, France and Guadeloupe, is interwoven with the histories of European wars in several ways. Her grandmother, Man Ya, explains the domestic violence of her husband by pointing to his own brutalising experiences as a soldier fighting in the French army in the First World War: ‘S’il fait des bêtises, Asdrubal, c’est juste pour sentir qu’il est vivant, que les défunts qui le terbolisent l’ont pas enterré avec eux dans la fosse où la mort mène le bal.’<sup>21</sup> This episode nuances the characterisation of Man Ya. In many ways she fits within the figure of the Caribbean matriarch, a figure which recurs across the *récits d’enfance* produced from the 1990s onwards.<sup>22</sup> Man Ya is devoted to her family and bears the difficulties she suffers with a mixture of resignation and stubbornness. Because

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<sup>20</sup> Rothberg, p. 6; p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Gisèle Pineau, *L’Exil selon Julia: Récit* (Paris: Stock, 1996), p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Hardwick, pp. 181–186.

of this, she could be seen as a ‘poteau-mitan’, the term for the central load-bearing pole holding up a house which is used as a metaphor for the resilience shown by Caribbean mothers. Yet where more stereotypical portrayals of the poteau-mitan work to remove women’s behaviour from the sphere of history into that of myth, here the violence Man Ya faces from her husband is ascribed specific historical roots. By locating the origins of this violence within a global circulation of European war-time trauma, Pineau situates the apparently ahistorical figure of Man Ya within the resonating histories of a violent modernity.

If fighting in the French army brings violence into the home two generations before Julia, in the generation just above her, the French army is a route to material and social advancement. Julia’s father fights for De Gaulle, which leads the family to a prosperous life, first in the Central African Republic and then in Paris. Julia locates the roots of her parents’ marriage and her own diasporic identity as a Guadeloupean born in France in her father’s link with De Gaulle:

Qui peut dire que nos destins ne sont pas liés à celui du Général? Il est là au commencement de la vie militaire de papa. Il est celui qui donne l’honneur et les félicitations, les grades et les médailles de guerre. Si papa n’était pas entré en dissidence pour le rejoindre, où serions-nous à l’heure qu’il est? Si papa n’avait pas porté l’uniforme de l’armée française, ma manman Daisy lui aurait-elle dit oui pour la vie? Voilà comment des Antillais naissent en France.<sup>23</sup>

The influence of her father and grandfather’s military experience on Julia’s life draws attention to the way configurations of the Caribbean diaspora are shaped by and shape the global movements of people brought about by the two world wars. Just as the relationship with De Gaulle brings the family away from Guadeloupe to France and then Africa as De Gaulle gains power, so when De Gaulle resigns after the failed constitutional referendum of

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<sup>23</sup> Pineau, p. 161.

1969, the family return to Guadeloupe. Julia's father is outraged at the way the French people reject De Gaulle from 1968 onwards and imputes this rejection to a lack of memory of De Gaulle's war-time work: 'Décidément l'Homme manque de mémoire et se nourrit d'oubli, dit-il.'<sup>24</sup> Different forms of memory are at play in the relationship of the two generations of the family to France and to its war-time histories. Julia's father laments the absence of the kind of collective memory which binds citizens of a nation together over time and space. Julia's grandfather, by contrast, is haunted by a different kind of memory, a traumatic memory which fractures temporal continuity and leads him to violence. Though very different forms of memory, the text's depiction of the reverberations of each within the family situates both the protagonist's father and grandfather as actors in European and French history.

Julia learns about the First and Second World War through her relationship with her father and grandfather. She enters into another form of memory of the Second World War through her reading of Anne Frank's diary. The entry of the Holocaust into Pineau's narrative through intertextuality emphasises the protagonist's mediated access to it. Since her first days at school in Paris, Julia suffers racism at the hands of her teachers. One year in particular, she is systematically bullied by a teacher who forces her to come and sit under the desk during lessons. This leads the adolescent to suffer nightmares. She cannot bring herself to speak to her parents about this but finds solace in reading Anne Frank. Julia's reading of the diary changes her perspective on her own experience of oppression:

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

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<sup>24</sup> Pineau, p. 155.

encore comme Anne Franck. Des fils invisibles nous relient pour que nous restions debout sur la terre.<sup>25</sup>

Reading the *Journal d'Anne Franck* offers a mode of entry into a transnational form of solidarity between children who suffer oppression because of their race, religion or ethnicity. Julia finds her sessions under the desk easier to bear knowing that Anne Frank also had to stay shut up for two years during the war. The comparison of the two children's experiences of physical confinement quickly moves into a conceptualisation of the experience of oppression as a form of social confinement. Just after comparing her own experiences under the desk and Anne's life in hiding, the text moves on to the following passage:

Comment vivre dans un pays qui vous rejette à cause de la race, de la religion ou de la couleur de peau? Enfermée, toujours enfermée! Porter une étoile jaune sur son manteau. Porter sa peau noire matin, midi et soir sous les regards des Blancs.<sup>26</sup>

This passage draws attention to the way the two children's physical confinement is supported by the social production of their difference. In drawing an analogy between the yellow star to be sewn on to the Jewish child's coat and Julia's skin, the author here underlines the way Julia's sense of her own difference is produced by the gaze of white French society ('sous les regards des Blancs'). The text goes on to tighten the analogy by having Julia say that when she suffers racist verbal abuse in the street, she feels like hanging her skin up on a hook behind a door.<sup>27</sup> The metaphor draws attention both to the contingent quality of her identity as a social other and to the difficulty of shaking it off.

In Pineau's depiction of Julia's experience, stories of Jewish suffering and oppression during the Second World War act as the condition for narrative possibility. As Celia Britton notes,

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<sup>25</sup> Pineau, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> Pineau, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> Pineau, p. 153.



this episode offers an example of one of the ways in which the Holocaust offers a ‘template for representations’ of experiences of post-war Caribbean migration to France, because reading Anne Frank’s diary inspires Julia to write her own life-story, which forms the text of *L’Exil selon Julia*.<sup>28</sup> The particular narrative the *Journal d’Anne Franck* enables is one of structural oppression. Julia has to read the *Journal d’Anne Franck* before she can articulate such a narrative, because her own place and time offers her no such conceptual framework. Stef Craps analyses a similar process at work in the writing of Caryl Phillips, an author born in St Kitts who grew up in England.<sup>29</sup> Phillips writes: ‘As a child, in what seemed to me a hostile country, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them.’<sup>30</sup> The comparisons between anti-Semitic and racist discrimination both authors make illustrate the need to proceed through other stories to reach an understanding of one’s own position in a society which does not acknowledge the existence of systemic racial discrimination. Pineau’s comparison between the experience of Anne Frank and that of Julia avoids ranking the suffering of the two young girls by focusing on the societal structures that enable their oppression rather than comparing how much pain they cause. This border-crossing comparison of Julia’s experience with that of Anne Frank enables an understanding of the child’s position in Paris that would not be available solely through her own experience or even the stories she hears from her parents and grandparents. Julia’s experience of France is informed by her grandparents’ and her father’s experiences of the country and by her own encounters, but it is also decisively shaped by reading a text that is neither French nor Caribbean. The composite character of Julia’s memories of her childhood in France show

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<sup>28</sup> Britton, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> The European Tribe (London: Picador, 1993), p. 54.

how her idea of France arises both out of multiple journeys between the Caribbean and France and the migration of texts and memories into the Francosphere through translation.

Like Chamoiseau and Condé, Pineau offers a portrayal of a form of memory which she arrives at both through listening to family stories and by drawing on sources of information about the past from outside her family. Julia learns about the Second World War partly through her father's recollections of his participation in it as a soldier. The ramifications of his role in the war shape the conditions of her birth and early life in ways that are beyond her control, leading her to a Parisian school where she is isolated by experiences of discrimination she cannot articulate alone. Her identification with Anne Frank through her reading suggests the narrative possibilities opened up by forms of memory which rely on translation and imaginative moves between separate places, times and languages. In the work of all three authors, the moves each makes from the Second World War to colonial histories are movements of the imagination. These authors draw on the resources of literary narrative to create echoes and connections between two very different kinds of histories. Chamoiseau's father's list of wildly varying aspects of European history, Condé's oblique articulation of her parents' disavowal of French violence and Pineau's metaphorical connection between Anne Frank's yellow star and her protagonist's skin can all be seen as peculiarly literary modes of linguistic expression. Each dramatizes the tension between language and the world, the word and its referent so that these comparisons can never be resolved into relationships of simple substitution. Colonial massacres and Hitler's regime are connected through Chamoiseau's list, but the list's inclusion of Jack the Ripper and the twist challenges any tendency by the reader to see all the list's elements as referring to one kind of historical event. A link between the Holocaust and French colonialism is similarly established through concurrent references to the two historical periods in the opening of Condé's *récit d'enfance*, but this link never becomes a positive connection, as both events are present through multiple layers of

negation. Pineau's creation of a parallel between Anne Frank's star and Julia's skin creates tensions between the different forms of oppression experienced by each child even as it brings the two into dialogue. This is an approach to comparison which remains highly conscious of the ways in which perceived connections between different histories are shaped by an interplay between knowledge and imagination and are brought into being through articulation in language. By maintaining the reader's focus on the space between language and the world, these texts explore the imaginative and linguistic processes which create the kinds of connections between Jewish and colonial histories underpinning laws such as the 2001 loi Taubira. While the legacies of the Second World War are often treated as a European issue and the afterlives of Atlantic slavery are rarely connected with intra-European histories, an examination of Caribbean connections between the Second World War and Atlantic slavery points to the global resonances of both in contemporary culture.

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