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MARIE NDIAYE'S MALADJUSTED WORLD:
STRANGENESS AND THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

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BY

BRENNA LAUREN RICE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines themes of alterity, empathy, strangeness, and neutral cruelty in four works by Marie NDiaye: *Un pas de chat sauvage* (2019), *La Naufragée* (1999), *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009), and *Ladivine* (2013). I propose that NDiaye's unique narrative immersion and corrupted narrative intimacy engender empathy in the reader at the very same time her work shows the limits to empathy in the face of systemic stigmatization.

My introduction discusses the novella *Un pas de chat sauvage* (2019) and the accompanying exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, examining the relationship between the spectator/reader and the text and its artistic subject. I propose that the museum space and the transportation of an historical figure to the 21st century illustrate the unequal relationship between the reader (museum-goer) and protagonists (historical figure) that we encounter in *La Naufragée*, *Trois femmes puissantes*, and *Ladivine*.

My first chapter continues these themes as they present historically, in an analysis of *La Naufragée* (1999). I discuss the novella's mythological, historical, political, and cultural allegories and intertext, and analyze the *femme-poisson* as an allegory for mixed identity. I briefly consider the mermaid figure in the context of eco-fiction. I examine this novella's ties to the artist JMW Turner, and propose that the character of the artist is a stand-in for both the writer and the reader, and that the artist's manipulation of the *femme-poisson* demonstrates limits to historical witnessing and ethical constraints or violations therein.

My second chapter examines themes of representation in the contemporary political moment portrayed in *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009). I analyze the confines of Frenchness and of artistic obligation to the nation (in the context of NDiaye's Prix Goncourt) and the marginalized subject (in the context of the novel). I propose that *Trois femmes puissantes* demonstrates

mundane systemic cruelty, in its depiction of characters who acknowledge the violence of their actions but persist, illustrating how unwelcoming nations manifest in and harm the individual.

My third chapter examines these themes in the context of the personal and familial, in an analysis of *Ladivine* (2013). I show that *Ladivine* depicts the psychological damage wrought by everyday alterity and suppression of identity. I also examine autobiographical elements of this novel, and consider it as a fictional *récit de filiation*. I propose that the novel's narrative style creates a corrupt narrative intimacy between the text and the reader as opposed to between the author or protagonist and the reader, and that this relationship demonstrates the limits to empathy by purposefully creating an unequal power structure between the reader and the protagonists. I also discuss themes of inheritance in the context of motherhood and colonial memory. Finally, I discuss how the novel's fantastical, literary, and religious allusions depict a cyclical and psychologically tenuous entrapment, forcing the protagonists to reject the world if they wish to inhabit personal identity, as allegorized by animal metamorphosis.

My conclusion reflects upon these themes in the context of NDiaye's politics and her engagement with her own work, as presented in several interviews with the author, and I propose that NDiaye's writing is far more politically engaged and socially observant than it purports to be, manifesting the notion of "the personal is political." I discuss the contradictions of Marie NDiaye's catalogue, representative of French universalism and unspoken but lived identity. I also consider discourse about the 2003 play *Papa doit manger* and a 2022 review of *Trois femmes puissantes*, which demonstrate the fraught line between pity, empathy, and appropriative reading. I finish with a final reflection on the intrinsic value of engaging with these works and of the courage found in their abrupt and ambiguous endings.

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Figure 1: JMW Turner, *Study of a Dead Pheasant and Woodcock*, 1820
Figure 2: JMW Turner, *Study of a Dead Pheasant and Woodcock Hanging Against a Picture Frame*, 1820
Source: Tate Research Publication

"In Those Years"
Adrienne Rich (1991)

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I

I. INTRODUCTION
L'ÉTRANGÈRE COMME PERSONNAGE

"Quand je dis comprendre, je pourrais dire aussi: entrer en sympathie avec. C'est comprendre au sens de ressentir, essayer de me mettre à la place de. Parce que la vie des autres *qui sont les autres* m'intéresse énormément." (*Le Matricule des anges* 27).

"Si je suis noire, je suis femme
Le public français est galant
J'espère en lui, je le proclame
Plus qu'en mon modeste talent
De votre France à l'art si chère
Messieurs, soutenez aujourd'hui
La renommée hospitalière
Accueillez la pauvre étrangère"
(Théophile Gautier, quoted in *Un pas de chat sauvage* 28-29)

"Me revient le souvenir d'histoires anciennes, d'un temps où je n'étais pas née ni ma mère ni la mère de ma mère, d'où provient le chant que je connais pourtant si bien et auquel je ne vois pas de fin, et ces histoires que je me rappelle à peine et auxquelles je n'avais pas supposé plus de vérité qu'aux légendes (c'est-à-dire une vérité si menue qu'on peut la compter pour rien) évoquent toutes l'enchantement mortel de notre voix." (*La Naufragée* 33)

Marie NDiaye describes literature as a means of transforming her "profound maladjustment to the world into something socially acceptable and even gratifying" (Maurin) but perhaps it is the world itself that is maladjusted. This dissertation will address four works by NDiaye, selected because they present a contrast of era, narrative perspective, autobiographical boundaries, and intertextuality. This introduction will briefly analyze the 2019 novella *Un pas de chat sauvage*, which will serve as a guiding thread because of its portrayal of historical erasure and contemporary representation, themes which will appear in each chapter. Chapter 1 will address *La Naufragée* (1999); in chapter 2 we will see NDiaye's most famous book, the Goncourt-winning *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009); and we will finish with a discussion of *Ladivine* (2013), NDiaye's first novel after winning the Goncourt. We will engage with the duality of these texts: this corpus simultaneously creates a space for empathy, questions the ethics of using fictionalized lived experiences to engender that empathy, and suggests a personal and

systemic limit to empathy. To this end, we will discuss whether fiction can ethically depict the politically marginalized subject, or if artistic depiction of historically silenced voices is an act of moral transgression. We will discuss how NDiaye creates an immersive and corrupted narrative intimacy between the reader and the text by using autobiographical echoes and ambiguous narrative perspectives, creating a sort of *chiaroscuro* depiction of a neutrally cruel world. We will witness characters undergo metamorphosis and/or embrace the stigmatized facets of their identity. We will also discuss the limits to this closure and ask if prejudicial social and political systems render empathy futile. What does it mean to *[accueillir] la pauvre étrangère* into a cruel, hopeless, and unequal world? We will discuss the moral implications of depicting alterity, and of the ethics of depicting stigmatized identities without always naming or responding to the stigmatizing force.

Praised for her *littérarité* and stories that combine a mundane French experience with enigmatic and inexplicable magical occurrences, NDiaye's oeuvre focuses on themes of strangeness and estrangement, portraying the subjectivity of othering and of being othered, and the psychological process by which social inequalities are manufactured, internalized, and veiled — simultaneously suppressed and visible. In *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (2007) the protagonist notes that she is marked by "stigmates évidents d'une ignominie quand bien même elle n'a pas de nom" (*Mon cœur à l'étroit* 265). The strangeness of NDiaye's characters is implicitly but rarely explicitly tied to societal or political marginalization — that is to say, race, class, or gender. This stigmatization is two-fold: an experience of being estranged from society and/or the family and the shame of internalizing this estrangement and rejecting one's origins, perpetuating this self-judgment generationally. As French cultural debates increasingly grapple with issues of race

and representation,[1] othered identities become increasingly legible over the course of this dissertation's corpus, transitioning from allegorical, mythical *métissage* in *La Naufragée* to named Blackness in *Ladivine*.

I. *Un riche avenir*: From Precocious Talent to a Celebrated and Vast Oeuvre

One of the most celebrated writers of literary fiction in France today, Marie NDiaye is an author of novels, children's books, theatre, short stories, and one self-portrait. NDiaye was just seventeen when her first book, *Quant au riche avenir*, was published under the famed Éditions de Minuit. NDiaye has since been published by an array of prestigious publishing houses, including Gallimard, Mercure de France, and Flammarion. From her very entry into the French literary sphere, NDiaye was the subject of an almost mythic curiosity. *Libération*'s review of her first novel, titled "A Star is Born" (in English, likely a nod to the American films of the same name), noted:

> Je m'en veux nonobstant ne le faut-il pas ? d'insister sur l'âge tendre de l'auteur. Nous ne sommes pas au cirque, l'ombre de Minou Drouet[2] ne flotte pas sur les tirages. Ce n'est pas non plus la projection poétique et visionnaire du génie adolescent incontrôlable, incontrôlé. […] Que soit célébré le laconisme des Éditions de Minuit qui, hors de tout battage publicitaire (pourtant, qu'il eût été facile!), permet tout juste de s'apercevoir par un bref calcul que Marie NDiaye a maintenant dix-sept ans, qu'elle a

[1] For example, some French politicians, such as former French Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer, have taken up battle against "le wokeism," alleging it threatens universalism: "The global 'woke' movement, with its roots in the Black consciousness movement in the United States, emphasizes the disparate experiences of racial groups and other minorities and stresses rather than minimizes the experiences of different elements of society. That is anathema to many in France, a nation that sees itself as a beacon of colorblind universalism" (El-Faizy). The anti-wokeism movement follows the Black Lives Matter protests in France in 2020 as well as allegations of "Islamo-gauchisme," the claim that leftism and Islamism are politically aligned. In February 2021, the French Minister of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation Frédérique Vidal proposed that Islamo-gauchisme and postcolonial studies are hindering French academia and universalism, and called for a formal research inquiry by the governmental organization Centre national de la recherche scientifique (the CNRS rejected this proposal, noting it contradicts academic freedom). With layered irony, given the import of an English word with AAVE origins to describe fear of American race study, we might compare the peril regarding "le wokeism" to conversations happening in the United States about critical race theory and cancel culture.

[2] Minou Drouet was published at the age of eight, but there were great doubts about the true authorship of her poems, many believing them to have been written by her mother.

> écrit ce roman à seize, quinze ans peut-être. […] La recherche maniaque de rigueur dans le style et de précision dans la pensée indique plutôt un talent adulte précocement mûri, avec ce je ne sais quoi en plus qui n'est pas encore fané. (Bernstein)

In *Le Monde*, Pierre Lepape also noted NDiaye's precocious talent: "Peut-être parce que Marie NDiaye a dix-huit ans et qu'elle devait en avoir seize lorsqu'elle a entrepris *Quant au riche avenir*, mais plus certainement parce qu'elle est déjà un grand écrivain: elle a trouvé une forme qui n'appartient qu'à elle pour dire des choses qui appartiennent à tous; et dès lors nous les découvrons" (Lepape).

NDiaye followed *Quant au riche avenir* (1985) with *Comédie classique* (1988), a novel written in a single sentence, and *La femme changée en bûche*, a novel in which the main character makes a deal with the Devil. All three books focus on fraught familial relationships, and all are about characters who can be interpreted as metaphorical embodiments of trauma and anxiety. Among her better-known novels are *En famille* (1990), *Rosie Carpe* (2001), *Mon coeur à l'étroit* (2007), *Trois femmes puissantes*, and *Ladivine*. *Trois femmes puissantes*, the subject of chapter 2, won the 2009 Prix Goncourt and depicts three varied immigrant experiences in an illustration of the contemporary refugee crisis. *Ladivine*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and which will be the focus of chapter 3, traces race, class, motherhood, and associated psychological trauma across four generations of a family. These themes are also at play in *En famille,* a novel about family alienation. *Rosie Carpe*, for which NDiaye was awarded the Prix Femina, is the story of a woman who is unable (and sometimes unwilling) to care for her child. Finally, *Mon coeur à l'étroit* is the story of Nadia, a teacher whose husband is brutally and mysteriously wounded.

NDiaye is also celebrated for her theatre. Her first published play, *Hilda* (1999), was awarded the Grand Prix de la Critique. Her third play, *Papa doit manger* (2003), was inducted

into the repertoire of the Comédie Française. NDiaye was later awarded the Grand Prix du Théâtre by Académie Française for *Les Grandes personnes* (2012). Her plays have been performed in French and in English and have been favorably reviewed. A 2003 review of *Papa doit manger* in *L'Express* praised NDiaye's style, writing "Son phrasé subtil, plein de réminiscences africaines, et sa présence poétique ouvrent une autre voie au théâtre français. Lui aussi mangera" (Liban). A 2017 *Le Monde* review of *Honneur à notre élue* likewise praises NDiaye's writing: "Dans un style admirable, elle creuse le sillon de ce qui est enfoui, comme elle le fait depuis ses débuts dans son œuvre romanesque et théâtrale: la dangerosité des familles, la suspicion du secret, la honte et la culpabilité souterraines" (Salino). Just as her prose style is notably sparse and requires the reader to fill in gaps, her plays appear quite bare; an interesting point of comparison, given that NDiaye's novels (such as *Ladivine*, as we will discuss in chapter 3) are sometimes described as lacking emotional immersion due to their minimal dialogue and distance between characters.

The presence of restrained, quiet characters — even when the work is entirely a dialogue or monologue, as in a play — demonstrates a calculated coldness which creates an estrangement between the reader or viewer and the protagonist. Dominique Rabaté describes NDiaye's theatre as "économique" (Rabaté 47), as they pare down the already stark style of NDiaye's novels to mere dialogue. NDiaye often omits stage directions, and without the any narration, the characters are pure speech. This creates an interesting complication with regards to NDiaye's portrayal of identity. Without stage directions, character descriptions, and sometimes even without dialogue between characters (her most recent play is an extended monologue, for example), NDiaye's theatre enacts the depiction of identity we will see most notably in *Ladivine*: a shared and subjective creation. Undefined, the characters become what the audience

perceives, further complicated by the incapacity of theatre to not depict or mention certain aspects of a character's identity: NDiaye's theatre cannot obfuscate racial and national identity in the same way her novels can, because the characters are immediately visible.

NDiaye has also written a few works that are more difficult to classify: *La Naufragée* (1999), *Autoportrait en vert* (2005), *Y penser sans cesse* (2011), and *Un pas de chat sauvage* (2019). These four texts exhibit differing levels of fictionality and are united by the use of image. *La Naufragée*, which we will discuss in chapter 1, is NDiaye's first work combining image with narrative: paintings by JMW Turner alternate with text by NDiaye as she tells the story of a mermaid's attempt to return to the sea. *Autoportrait en vert*, which we will briefly touch on in chapter 3, was written for the Mercure de France's *Traits et Portraits* series, a collection of "récits souterrains" by established authors. This story does share elements with NDiaye's own life; however, it does not provide any clear, identifiable "Marie NDiaye" character, and the protagonist's story is embedded with elements of the fantastic, such as phantom women. *Y penser sans cesse* is a short prose-poem about a French woman who has moved to Germany, where her young son is inhabited by a ghost. This text features photos by Denis Cointe that are not directly related to the text. *Un pas de chat sauvage* (2019) likewise combines text and image, using photos by the nineteenth century photographer Nadar. The use of photos and paintings by other artists reinforces the intangibility and ambiguity of her larger project as the images do not depict (or even explicitly connect to) the narrative content (for example, in *Autoportrait en vert*, photos of anonymous women who do not appear in or correspond to the text). The use of imprecise illustration casts doubt on the reliability of memory and reinforces the subjectivity of identity and of storytelling.

In addition to her works for adults, Marie NDiaye has written three children's books: *La Diablesse et son enfant* (2000), *Les Paradis de Prunelle* (2003), and *Le Souhait* (2005). Similar to her adult protagonists, the characters in NDiaye's children's books don't fit into their families and communities, though NDiaye gives characters in her children's stories more peaceful resolutions. For example, *La Diablesse et son enfant* tells of a Diablesse, described by "sa peau sombre et ses yeux luisants," who lives in the forest and is depicted by monochromatic blue illustrations (by the illustrator Nadja). The Diablesse has a normal face and hooves in lieu of human feet hooves which appeared only after the loss her child, who has mysteriously disappeared. The villagers are frightened of her. They also fear her missing child and begin inspecting the feet of the village's children. The Diablesse eventually comes across a child with hooves who has been expelled from the community, and the Diablesse takes in the child, at which point her feet return to normal. This story shares many similarities with NDiaye's 2001 play *Providence*, in which a woman named Providence looks for her lost child and is shunned for having hooves. In *Providence*, the equivalent Diablesse character is confronted by a priest, who accuses the Diablesse of feeding her child to pigs. The story concludes with Providence lashing out against the villagers who appear to have come to kill her. NDiaye's children's stories offer a possibility for reconciliation and acceptance not afforded the characters in her fiction for adults, who disappear, transform, or die. Finally, NDiaye has also contributed to a film. *White Material* (2009), co-written with the director Claire Denis and starring Isabelle Huppert, depicts a French coffee producer in an unnamed Francophone African nation.

NDiaye's most recent novel, *La Vengeance m'appartient* (Gallimard, 2021), tells the story of a lawyer taking on the case of a mother who has just murdered her three children. The lawyer falls into a state of psychological turmoil as she wonders why the husband sought out her legal

counsel despite her mediocre reputation. NDiaye's most recent play, a short monologue titled *Royan: La Professeure de français* (Gallimard, 2020; performed at the 2021 Festival d'Avignon), was commissioned and performed by the French actress Nicole Garcia under the direction of her son, Frédéric Bélier-Garcia. The title character is a teacher from Oran, Algeria who fears confronting the parents of a student who died by suicide in her classroom. NDiaye was also recently announced as a 2023 resident of Villa Albertine, a project by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the French Ministry of Culture which offers residencies in various cities in the United States. In a continuation of her genre- and medium-crossing works, NDiaye will collaborate with the French artist known as Smith on an opera.

NDiaye's works have been translated into numerous languages, including English, Portuguese, and Spanish. The independent publisher Two Lines Press, run by the nonprofit The Center for the Art of Translation, is home to several of the English translations of NDiaye's works. Jordan Stump, the Willa Cather Professor of French at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, contributed six of the nine available English translations of NDiaye's work. Stump was awarded the 2021 National Translation Award in Prose from The American Literary Translators Association for his translation of *The Cheffe* (2016), published by the major publishing house Penguin Random House, suggesting a recent increase in NDiaye's cultural capital abroad.

In a *New Inquiry* review of *Ladivine*, Jeffrey Zuckerman calls NDiaye's work "perfectly suited to the disjointed ethos of contemporary Francophone literature" (Zuckerman). Shirley Jordan describes "the singular Frenchness of NDiaye's classically polished literary style" (Jordan 98). Thérèse Migraine-George describes NDiaye as the perfect combination of French literature (sensory and psychological) and Anglo-Saxon literature (directly handling the "question of multi-ethnicity," the notion of "Anglo-Saxon" itself being a rather French

construct) and describes her as a combination of Marguerite Duras and Zadie Smith, an idea that points to the lack of a model for identitarian writing in French literature and describes the impossible juncture at which NDiaye's writing sits: the political engagement of Anglo-Saxon literature (we can take for example Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, which describes a mixed-race American-British family and describes racial politics in the UK and US), an economical French psychological fiction, and an intersection of magical genres (eco-fiction, liminal fantasy, and horror).

II. *La Femme changée en corpus*: Critical Approaches to Marie NDiaye

NDiaye's career spans three decades, is remarkably consistent in theme and style (though varied in genre, with NDiaye's talent for novels, theatre, short stories, and children's books), but is not easily digestible. There is a reason her vast, strange catalogue is so rewarding when read in dialogue with itself, as indicated by the tendency of scholarship on NDiaye (including this project) to engage with several of her works at once, transforming blankness into a sort of *bruit blanc* as each work informs the others.

Literary criticism on Marie NDiaye's works has grown alongside her popularity. In 2007, the first international conference devoted solely to NDiaye's work, titled "Autour de Marie NDiaye," was held in London, and papers from this conference were published in the 2009 collection *Marie NDiaye: L'Étrangeté à l'œuvre* (under the direction of Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan). In 2011, a conference titled "Marie NDiaye: Une femme puissante" was held in Mannheim, Germany, and the papers presented were published in the 2013 collection *Une femme puissante: L'Œuvre de Marie NDiaye* (under the direction of Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe). There is additionally the February 2022 issue of *Parages*: *La revue Théâtre national de Strasbourg* (Issue 11), which was devoted to NDiaye.

Marie NDiaye: L'Étrangeté à l'œuvre is large in scope but the linking thread of *l'étrangeté* illustrates the cohesion of NDiaye's works. Dominique Rabaté's chapter, titled "Qui peut l'entendre? Qui peut savoir?" builds upon the idea of empathy set forth in his own book: NDiaye's characters are frequently characterized by their ability to show empathy, a "devoir éthique" that is fundamental to literature. Andrew Asibong's chapter, "Tou(te)s mes ami(e)s: le problème de l'amitié chez Marie NDiaye" continues this thread by examining inequality between ndïayenne women, stemming in race, physical difference, social class, etc., and which results (no matter the source) in a difference so embedded in the psyche of each character that neither can exist without the other. In their chapter "Si être écrivain," Lydie Moudileno and Warren Motte propose that the threads linking Marie NDiaye's books are "la virtuosité linguistique et l'étrangeté." Her characters are both "minutely elaborated" and unknowable, as NDiaye enters into the psyches of characters who do not (or cannot) know themselves.

Clarissa Behar's chapter, "Écrire en pays à majorité blanche," from *Une femme puissante: L'œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, describes the difficulty in discussing the relationship between French literature and "la blancheur raciale pilier de la construction d'un nationalisme français." Behar notes that NDiaye's biography has been tied to almost every critique of her work, demonstrating "la façon dont le champ littéraire français produit un nationalisme néo-racial." Lydie Moudileno's chapter, "Marie NDiaye: entre visibilité et réserve" analyzes the "réserve" of NDiaye

the quieter presence of an author who is uninterested in self-promotion despite her work being culturally and critically lauded and quite popular. Moudileno concludes that NDiaye has contributed to the diversity of French literature but does not consider herself a "diverse" author, nor does she believe she actively played a part in the diversification.

Helpful to this discussion is Dominic Thomas's 2013 article "The 'Marie NDiaye Affair' or the Coming of a Postcolonial Évoluée," which contextualizes NDiaye's work within the identity questions faced by French literature in the mid-2000s following the 2007 manifesto "Pour une littérature-monde en français." Thomas proposes that NDiaye – a French person with African heritage – was treated as a modern-day "évoluée" by the press, a dated and pejorative term referring to colonized subjects who had successfully assimilated to French social and cultural norms.

Thérèse Migraine-George's "Writing as Otherness: Marie NDiaye's Inalterable Humanity" likewise develops upon the strangeness of Marie NDiaye within the sphere of French literature and how it is reflected or represented by her characters. Migraine-George suggests that NDiaye does not focus on the tangible marginality of her characters' identities, but rather "otherness" as a concept and psychological process. By examining "otherness," Migraine-George proposes that NDiaye necessitates that French literary and academic institutions self-reflect on their relations to cultural differences and how they have perpetuated or created them.

Diana Holmes's "Marie NDiaye's Femme Puissante – A Double Reading," a chapter from her book *Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France Since the Belle Époque*, offers a reading of *Trois femmes puissantes* that one might align with the visibility discussed by Moudileno. Addressing the attention brought on by the Prix Goncourt, Holmes proposes a "middlebrow" ("non-academic, reading for pleasure, interest and curiosity") reading of *Trois Femmes Puissantes*, in particular of its third chapter about Khady Demba, which she believes is the most accessible of the three stories and the collection's most political, as it responds to Europe's refugee crisis.

In addition to these conference collections, there are several monographs devoted to NDiaye, including Dominique Rabaté's *Marie NDiaye* (2008), Andrew Asibong's *Marie NDiaye:*

Blankness and Recognition (2013), Shirley Jordan's *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions* (2017), and *Mothers Voicing Mothering?: The Representation of Motherhood in the Novels and Short Stories of Marie NDiaye* by Pauline Eaton (2021). Color, motherhood, food, visibility, language and the *non-dit*, and race are frequent subjects of discussion. Dominique Rabaté's *Marie NDiaye* is the first book to devote itself to the "dynamique essentielle" of Marie NDiaye: strangeness. Rabaté describes the strangeness embodied by her protagonists; the strangeness of her narrative universe, where magic exists and humans sometimes transform into and communicate with animals; and, finally, the strangeness of her writing, which creates a "défamiliarisation de l'univers dans lequel nous vivons," producing a disconcerting malaise in the reader.

Andrew Asibong's *Blankness and Recognition* is a particularly helpful and thorough analysis of Marie NDiaye's work. Asibong positions his discussion in the lens of "blankness": themes of absence and emotional emptiness. I will invoke Asibong's work throughout this dissertation, particularly in chapter 3 and in the conclusion. Asibong's book is divided chronologically: the first novel cycle (works published prior to *Un temps de saison*, 1994), the second novel cycle (beginning with *La Sorcière*), and NDiaye's "Undead Theatre." Covering all of NDiaye's pre-2013 works allows the reader to examine the continuity of the "unemotional demeanor, a deadness" of her protagonists, as well as their "blancness," a term Asibong proposes to describe "the typically NDiayean [post-racial] state, most often achieved only provisionally or else in fantasy, of being no longer recognizable as a racialized minority (Asibong 19).

Shirley Jordan's *Inhospitable Fictions* examines NDiaye's work in relation to hospitality studies. Jordan writes that NDiaye's writing is compelling because of its focus on intimacy and affect, combined with her systematic avoidance of hospitality. Jordan suggests the true center

of suffering and exclusion lies within the family, which can serve as a metaphor for larger social groups (such as the nation). Jordan also notes that NDiaye's portrayals of inhospitality do not depict the experiences of a specific minority, but instead a generalized experience of alterity. As Jordan notes, while much of the discussion surrounding hospitality focuses on relationships between strangers, NDiaye illustrates the (in)hospitality that exists between familial and/or familiar relationships. Jordan also examines hospitality in the context of animal transformations, suggesting that these metamorphoses give the characters a greater capacity to welcome others. Jordan concludes that NDiaye's writing builds a new framework of hospitality between the reader and text, in which the reader must be open to welcoming NDiaye's othered characters, who are incapable of engaging meaningfully with the world due to having internalized the reasons (sexism, racism, class inequality) for their alterity.

Most recent is *Mothers Voicing Mothering?: The Representation of Motherhood in the Novels and Short Stories of Marie NDiaye* by Pauline Eaton (2021). Eaton traces cycles of maternal failure: mothers who fail or lose their daughters, and the generational replication of that experience. Eaton uses preexisting frameworks and mythologies, such as the Madonna complex, to relate NDiaye's work to prior feminist and psychoanalytic scholarship. Eaton proposes that struggle is a predominant theme of ndiayïenne motherhood but there are nevertheless moments of joy and connection (an outlier in scholarship on literary mothers, which often focuses on cruelty and trauma). Mothers seek to avoid failing their daughters by denying their motherhood and seeking new identities. Eaton suggests that NDiaye's depictions of ordinary mothers in extraordinarily difficult circumstances fills a gap in literature, which does not devote enough singular attention to motherhood.

There have also been several dissertations in recent years focused on Marie NDiaye, including one which aligns quite closely with my own. Laura Bea Jensen's 2017 project "Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France: Marie NDiaye and Bessora" analyzes race-blindness and French universalism in *La Naufragée*, *Ladivine*, *Rosie Carpe*, and *Trois femmes puissantes*. Jensen's reading of NDiaye is accompanied by discussion of Bessora's novels *53 cm* (1999) and *Les taches d'encre* (2000), *Petroleum* (2004), as well as Bessora's doctoral dissertation *Mémoires Petrolières au Gabon* (2002). My own readings of NDiaye align with Jensen's conclusions, proposing that NDiaye's universalism demonstrates a "violence inherent to French race blindness, which unfairly burdens people of color" ("Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France," Jensen 230). Jensen proposes that NDiaye's universalism differs from that of Bessora in that Bessora's goal is transcending identity via cultural exchange. Jensen's chapter on *La Naufragée* is particularly relevant to my own research, especially her analysis of JMW Turner's place in NDiaye's work, and I will build upon Jensen's work by analyzing the narrative and autobiographical aspects of NDiaye's writing, putting NDiaye into dialogue with herself to examine the political and moral role of the artist the ethical boundaries therein.

III. *L'Écrivaine, romans d'une "étrangère"*: Perceptions of Identity, Nationality, and Race

In *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson writes that art becomes more interesting when it "shifts the focus from making us more intelligible to ourselves to helping us become more curious about how strange we really are" (Nelson 171). Nelson quotes Lionel Trilling, who writes that it's possible that the "contemplation of cruelty will not make us humane but cruel; that the reiteration of the badness of our spiritual condition will make us consent to it" (Nelson 7). What reassurance is there that NDiaye's reader will respond to cruelty not with consent, but with rejection, and with hospitality toward the other? Given the psychological nature of NDiaye's

narratives and her frequent use of first-person, we might qualify this cynical coldness as a suspicion by the narrator/protagonist who is (across NDiaye's oeuvre) consistently rejected by the community.

Some of the tensions in reading NDiaye stem from the need to interpret that which is not named (such as her depictions of race) or that which she says does not exist, despite its presence in her writing (i.e. her claims to fictionality and neutrality, in spite of the ties to her own life present in many of her stories[3]). NDiaye's self-positioning is often at odds with her actual work and with her political and sociological commentaries. In chapter three, we will discuss a "fragilité psychologique," a term NDiaye uses in *Un pas de chat sauvage* to discuss the unsettling nature of immersing oneself in the life of another person who is impossible to know.

While much has been written about the strangeness of NDiaye's writing, subjects, and position in French society and the political moment(s) contemporary to her works, my analysis will build on these themes by proposing that NDiaye's use of the "creator" character (*Un pas de chat sauvage* and *La Naufragée*) as well as a subversive narrative intimacy (*Trois femmes puissantes* and *Ladivine*) creates a false or futile and instructive empathy in the reader, reflecting the structural inequalities she depicts, in a strange facsimile of a neutrally cruel world.

The quiet coldness of NDiaye's characters is a product of the protagonist's environment (and is not always as cold or neutral as it would seem, as we will discuss). It is not possible to undo the psychological damage of having been rejected and stigmatized, even after being accepted (or "passing"). NDiaye's characters are invisibly injured, and she offers not merely a

[3] In a 2013 interview with Radio France Internationale: "Non, je n'écris ni en tant que femme, ni en tant que femme noire. Je ne me définis pas comme une femme noire, née en France en 1967. Ce sont des notions factuelles qui n'ont pas d'importance, s'agissant de mon écriture. J'écris en tant qu'être humain." (Chanda)

witnessing of these experiences, but access to them — the feeling of being strange and the inability to understand or articulate why. NDiaye's fiction produces conditions of empathy (hearing the strange other, imagining the complexity of their experience, wishing them relief) without the capacity to actually respond. In being powerless to change the systems from which inequality and cruelty stem, we are stuck in the same cycle as NDiaye's characters, illustrating the stark difference between artistic empathy and social reality, as well as the political futility of compassion. Pap Ndiaye, whose work I will discuss below, writes in *La Condition noire* that a shared experience of discrimination creates new forms of solidarity and identification. However, Marie NDiaye's protagonists — estranged, abandoned — do not experience *shared* discrimination, because they reject and try to change the conditions which have othered them. NDiaye depicts the everyday experience of a discriminatory society which professes itself equal, and the reality of confronting this inequality.

In an interview concerning *Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye describes what she finds most interesting about the question of Blackness in French society is the "communauté visible qui réclame l'invisibilité. […] je me suis rendu compte que beaucoup de Noirs, antillais donc français, ou étrangers, ont l'impression d'être exclus, surtout à Paris où ils sont sans cesse contrôlés" (Kaprèlian). She notes that her brother was also relatively unconscious of their Blackness, and "ce qui comptait c'était l'école, les diplômes, une égalité entre tous les citoyens dès lors qu'ils sont à un même niveau d'études[4]… En fait, ça ne marche pas tout à fait comme

[4] In a discussion at a conference about her work, Marie NDiaye said that she does not discuss sociological and political ideas in her works because "je ne les ai pas moi, ces outils théoriques"; she says these questions are better left to academics and readers" (Asibong and Jordan 189). In another interview, she notes "J'ai arrêté mes études très jeune pour écrire. Parfois, en interviews, je sens que je n'ai pas les outils pour parler de littérature, n'ayant pas fait Normale sup ou de longues études. Alors je réponds le plus simplement possible" (Kaprèlian). NDiaye also suggests that French minorities are excluded from higher education and knowledge in a way that minorities in the United States and United Kingdom are not, and also that class and education matter less in the Anglophone context. This point merits further discussion

ça. […] Lui il est agrégé, peut réfléchir à ça, prendre de la distance, mais qu'est-ce que ça doit être dans la tête d'un jeune de 20 ans? Quelle violence cela doit être, quelle haine ça doit développer… C'est très troublant" (Kaprèlian). These quotations point to the psychological violence of not naming difference and nevertheless being persecuted for it, an idea that directly relates to her admission of not having really considered the question of Blackness in France before her brother's work on it. This is in part what makes NDiaye's work so difficult to comprehend, and so rich to read: an articulation of an experience of which protagonists (and at some point, the author) are not consciously aware, and upon becoming aware, about which they feel unqualified to speak. These ambiguous and unspoken identities force her readers to interrogate their own biases what assumptions do we make about these characters, and why?

Marie NDiaye was born to a Senegalese father and a mother from Beauce (a northern region in France) and was raised by her mother in a banlieue of Paris. NDiaye's father returned to Senegal when NDiaye was one year old, and she did not visit him there until she was an adult. In a 1997 essay "Mon quatrième roman," she writes: "Élevée en France, n'ayant pas de contact avec ma famille sénégalaise, uniquement avec celle de ma mère, famille on ne peut plus traditionnelle et typique, j'étais, je me sentais exclusivement Française" (Asibong 7). She has also commented on being an African writer "Never having lived in Africa, and having scarcely known my father (I am of mixed race), I cannot be considered to be a francophone novelist, that is a French-speaking foreigner" (Thomas 149), delineating clearly between the hexagon and other French-speaking nations and territories, as opposed to considering la Francophonie a reference to all French-speaking nations, including France.

(with regards to its accuracy in the American context, as well as what she means by "French" writers), but points to an acknowledgment of racial inequalities of social and cultural capital, even when she describes herself as "un être humain qui écrit."

NDiaye is reluctant to analyze her own work in relation to her biography ("J'estime souvent n'avoir pas grand-chose à dire. Je pense aussi en général que le rôle de l'auteur n'est pas d'être son critique, son exégète, son analyste" [Asibong and Jordan 188]), but questions about her personal history persist. In a 2009 interview with *Nouvel Observateur*, when asked about identifying as "Noire de France, Noire en France, métisse," NDiaye responded: "Aucune définition de ce que je suis censée être ne peut me venir à l'esprit. [...] j'entends de plus en plus d'injonctions de se définir (en tant que Noire ou métisse, métisse en France, etc.). Se définir, c'est se réduire, se résumer à des critères et par le fait entériner ce que d'autres seraient ou ne seraient pas'" ("Marie NDiaye: 'Se Définir, C'est Se Réduire'"). Despite NDiaye's rejection of this question, the interviewer follows up: "Avez-vous souffert du racisme?" NDiaye responded, "Si j'en ai été personnellement victime, je ne m'en suis pas rendu compte. Sans doute ce que je fais me préserve: je n'ai pas à postuler pour quoi que ce soit, pas de CV à envoyer et on ne me voit jamais sur un terrain de football... J'en souffre à travers ceux qui en souffrent, parce que c'est une des formes les plus violentes de la bêtise satisfaite." Such a question demonstrates the difficulty in understanding NDiaye's work within the context of French universalism, under which nationality is the dominant and most important identity (at least officially, though this is not true in everyday experience, where other visible identities like race and gender can supersede nationality).

As Mame Fatou-Niang described in a March 2022 interview coinciding with her work on universalism in 21st century France, "Frenchness is one and indivisible. It cannot be hyphenated with ethnicity, it cannot be hyphenated with race, it cannot be hyphenated with religion. *Francité est la francité*" (Ogunkeye). In another interview, Fatou-Niang points out that there is no word in French for "Blackness," and this lack of a linguistic anchor precludes formal

university departments of ethnic and cultural studies: "[There is a] difficulty to accept what we are unveiling, the fact that we are highlighting elements whose invisibility has been naturalized" (Ahmad).[5] The discussion of Blackness in a French universalist society brings to mind a key dilemma of postcolonial studies, in which postcolonial oppression is necessarily described in the language and modality of the oppressor. NDiaye's writing is a cunning illustration of inadequate language born of harmful systems, as she draws attention to the inadequate linguistic systems which exist by maintaining them. Race is largely unnamed and is rooted in physical description (such as skin tone and hair), meaning the reader subconsciously makes assumptions about a character's identity.

One of the thinkers who has tried to grapple with these questions is Pap Ndiaye, Marie NDiaye's brother. Pap Ndiaye (who spells his name with a lowercase *d*) is a French historian, social scientist, and politician who researches race and identity, as well as the genesis of ethnic studies in American academia. Marie NDiaye and Pap Ndiaye have collaborated on two projects: Marie NDiaye wrote a short story for *La Condition noire* and they both contributed to the same exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay. Pap Ndiaye is one of the pioneers of Black studies in France, and has a doctorate from École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Pap Ndiaye is currently a Professor of History at Sciences Po and was recently appointed Ministre de l'Éducation nationale (overseeing France's public education system, effective May 2022). Among his works are *La Condition noire: Essai sur une minorité française* (2008), *Les Noirs américains* (2009), and *Histoire de Chicago* (with Andrew Diamond, 2013). *La Condition noire* examines the history of

[5] Mame Fatou-Niang further notes that "Black studies in France is really at an embryonic stage compared to the US or other countries like Canada and the UK. It's an area of scholarly inquiry that focuses on the emergence of Black identity politics within the universalist tenets of French Republicanism. There is not one ethnic studies department to this day in France. I had never heard of any one of these canonical writers [Black French scholars like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Cesaire, Maryse Condé]. It was in the US that I discovered it was possible to be Black and French" (Ahmad).

Blackness in France and draws comparisons between the United States and France. My readings of Marie NDiaye and my understanding of race in France will draw heavily from *La Condition noire*, given its influence on Marie NDiaye and its usefulness in understanding French universalism as compared to American identity politics (and, of course, given my perspective as an American reader). This will be especially important when discussing *Ladivine*, which reads very much like a "passing" novel from an American perspective but perhaps not in a French context.

Pap Ndiaye proposes that France lacks scholarship and political work about racial discrimination, and lacks recognition of structural racism. He suggests that the organizations which do exist (like SOS Racisme, an anti-racist association founded in 1984 in response the rise of the extreme right and associated racist attacks) focus on specific racist actions such as job hiring discrimination or public violence and do not adequately include instances of everyday racism. Marie NDiaye's works depict the everyday psychological experience of French Blackness by showing the pervasive stigmatization of non-white French people, without acknowledging race, in a demonstration of French racial politics and social sciences, which makes the discrimination harder to address by not naming the cause. *La Condition noire* is thus a very useful accompaniment to NDiaye's work because of the "invisibility" of racism and identity in her work the aforementioned "stigmates évidents d'une ignominie quand bien même elle n'a pas de nom."

Marie NDiaye's work examines specific though multifaceted experiences of otherness, estrangement, and crises of identity. The ambiguity or vagueness with which she describes the "othering" qualities of her characters allows her focus to be on the physical and psychological experience of being rejected, creating a thread of anxiety that persists throughout

all of her books. This is in line with her rejection of a classification of her own identities: she does not reduce the experience of one singular race or gender (or class), but directs the reader's attention to the feeling of stigmatization, rather than its causes. As Jordan Stump notes in an interview with the Center for the Art of Translation, race is "a fundamental part of her work: race is always potentially at work in her narratives, but with few exceptions we can never really be quite sure what's going on" (Coolidge).

In addition to the importance of visual elements such as photographs (*Un pas de chat sauvage*) and paintings (*La Naufragée*), the museum as a means of curated historical memory will be important to our discussion of the creator and the ethics of historical portraiture. The museum as an institution can imply a reverence (JMW Turner, as we will see in chapter 1) and/or an exhumation (Maria Martinez, as we will see in the introduction; colonial history, as we will discuss in chapter 3). The museum is a manifestation of curated and problematic empathy, as institutions led by individuals delineate what art belongs to whom. That is to say, even when concerns are addressed (the colonial histories of and problematic contemporary donors to many collections and museums), they are framed by the institution that is acknowledging harm. The spectator is thus engaging with 1) an historical and cultural space (the museum), 2) an individual's interpretation of an artist or a theme (the curator), 3) the artist, and 4) their (the spectator's) preconceived understanding.

Identity is described with greater precision in NDiaye's more recent work, though she maintains her characteristic ambiguity by forcing the reader to infer race contextually by vague visual markers or by comparison (for example, in *Ladivine*, a character having different hair texture than their non-white parent or a character's skin being darker than that of their white French parent). We find a unique manifestation of this in *Un pas de chat sauvage*, in which the

protagonist is implied to be a deceased historical figure who is photographically present, and thus a physical identity is present from the book's very cover (much different from her other works, which hold the famously blank cover of Éditions de minuit). And as we will discuss, NDiaye plays a slight trick with the identity of the narrator, whose race is contextually revealed partway through the text.[6]

IV. *Des pas de fantômes et d'héritage*: Ethics of Fiction and History in *Un pas de chat sauvage*

Marie NDiaye's participation in a 2019 Musée d'Orsay exhibition on *le modèle noir* places her at the center of contemporary debates on race in French intellectual circles and reimagines her public and writerly identity. *Un pas de chat sauvage*, commissioned in the context of this exhibition, questions NDiaye's broader oeuvre with regards to its fictionality. In an interview about *Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye shared: "Je ne suis à l'aise que dans la fiction, je ne pouvais qu'imaginer à partir des personnages représentés, et j'ai choisi Nadar non par préférence pour l'œuvre, mais parce que je pouvais obtenir des éléments biographiques."[7] Yet there are clear parallels between NDiaye's life and the museum novella, and with NDiaye describing the main historical subject about whom she has been given historical documents and research as "un personnage," it is difficult to wholly separate the fiction from its creator.

[6] As mentioned above, we can also consider the unique manifestation of identity and character descriptions in NDiaye's theatrical works, which also have very bare character descriptions, are also about race, and in which certain identities such as race and gender are theoretically immediately visible though racial identity is, of course, not always "readable" in such a way, and national identity certainly isn't. NDiaye creates conditions in which the reader or viewer presumes a certain identity, highlighting the impossibility of a color-blind society as well as the arbitrariness of certain physical markers.

[7] NDiaye continues: "De fait, la conservatrice d'Orsay, Isolde Pludermacher, m'a transmis tous les documents concernant cette Maria, articles de journaux, lettres de Théophile Gautier, extraits de lettres de Baudelaire. Et, d'emblée, j'ai été convaincue de l'hypothèse que Maria l'Antillaise et Maria Martinez ne faisaient qu'une seule et même personne. En tout cas, c'est celle que j'ai choisie comme auteure de fiction" (Marin La Meslée).

The exhibition, hosted by the Musée d'Orsay and titled "Le Modèle noir: de Géricault à Matisse," was the first of its nature in France, where the analysis of race and disciplines like "Black Studies" remain marginal. The exhibition was accompanied by several secondary publications: a chronological resource by Pap Ndiaye (*Le Modèle noir: de Géricault à Matisse: la chronologie*), a magazine publication which features works from the exhibition as well as a round table with its commissaires, an album by the rapper Abd Al-Malik, and a short novel by Marie NDiaye commissioned by the museum: *Un pas de chat sauvage*. Writing a novella for an exhibition titled "le modèle noir," and in which a scholar of ethnic studies and Blackness (Pap Ndiaye) is likewise participating, aligns NDiaye with identity studies and also with the concept of serving as a "modèle." Cécile Debray, one of the curators, outlines the exhibitions goals in the museum catalogue: "Nous avons aussi souhaité réinterroger l'influence du métissage, de l'altérité, sur la genèse moderne" (Bauwens 5-7).

Debray described the concept of modèle in this exhibition as having a double meaning: an artistic or figure model and a model as a "porteur de valeurs." Marie NDiaye depicts (and complicates) the notion of the model and of tracing a timeline of Blackness and métissage on "la genèse moderne" by using her characteristic identity confusions and a sort of time travel, as a deceased historical figure appears in the 21st century, meaning she has both contributed to and exists *within* "la genèse moderne." Further, the inclusion of NDiaye in this exhibition exhibits the progress — or lack thereof — of antiracist and inclusive thought in 21st century arts, given media and popular discussions of her identity and work.[8] Indeed, the same year of *Le*

[8] Four decades into her career and countless interviews and articles that designate her French nationality, searches of the *#MarieNDiaye* hashtag on Instagram and Twitter still result in lists of "African writers to read." For example, the Brazilian press Ímã Editorial describes NDiaye as an "escritora africana" and also as "uma das maiores autoras francesas contemporâneas." There is a conflation or confusion between Blackness, African heritage, nationality, and NDiaye's actual identity both in French media and as a "cultural export," reinforced by the confusion between "Francophone" as signifying French-speaking

Modèle noir, Assemblée Nationale rejected calls (led by Mame-Fatou Niang and Julien Suaudeau) to remove a mural (*1794: 1ère Abolition de l'Esclavage* by the white French artist Hervé de Rosa) that uses racist caricatures to commemorate the French abolition of slavery.

The title, *Un pas de chat sauvage*, is a Creole proverb expressing solitude[9], as NDiaye imagines Martinez must have lived a rather solitary existence, "étrangère à plusieurs titres" (La Meslée). The original Creole is "fè an pat chat mawon," with "mawon" meaning brown. The French translation interprets "brown cat" as "savage cat," drawing an equivalency between "sauvage" and "brown" with likely racist connotations. There are multiple Maria/es in *Un pas de chat sauvage*: 1) Maria Martinez (1.5: also known historically as Maria l'Antillaise or as "la Malibran noire", a Cuban singer who performed in Paris and disappeared into anonymity); 2: Marie Sachs, who appears to the narrator and seems to be a reincarnated Martinez; 3: Marie NDiaye, who is not present in the text but whose identity seems, at first, to align with the anonymous narrator. Maria Martinez was a real musical artist who was the subject of several photo portraits by the French artist Nadar in the 1850s. *Un pas de chat sauvage* begins and ends with a Nadar photo of Maria Martinez/l'Antillaise (reprinted in the inside front and back covers, as well as on the front cover), includes an 1852 daguerreotype of "la Malibran noire," as well as several quotes from other primary sources (namely newspapers, lending the fictional narrative an historical legitimacy and framing) (see Appendix A).

The fictionalization of Martinez's life suggests that the incapacity to wholly know Martinez should not prohibit the attempt, for the act of seeking such an understanding (that is

and "Francophone" as signifying outside of the hexagon.

[9] On her choice of title, Marie NDiaye answers: "Cela vient d'un proverbe exprimant la solitude. Comme elle devait être seule, Maria, étrangère à plusieurs titres, venant de La Havane, seule du point de vue familial et noire, voilà le sens de ce titre" (Marin La Meslée). The proverb ("Fè an pat chat mawon" in Creole) can also mean to make a quick getaway, as Maria Martinez will do at the end of the novella.

to say, the act of writing and reading this book) is also meaningful. Indeed, the process of research and writing is the true subject of *Un pas de chat sauvage*. This is logical within the context of the exhibition, which sought to not only highlight the figure of *le modèle noir*, but also to rethink and reframe the relationship between the viewer and these works (for example, certain pieces were renamed to give agency to the subject, such as Manet's *La Négresse* being retitled *Portrait de Laure*[10]). Marie Sachs asks the narrator what she has "appris 'de' Maria Martinez," and the narrator corrects her with "intérieurement par 'sur,'" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 16) noting after that she knows "à présent qu'elle avait écrit rigoureusement ce qu'elle voulait dire." On the same page, the narrator notes that her interest in Marie Sachs is rapacious and selfish and the two do not resemble each other in the slightest.

We know this to be a work of fiction because of context clues which require knowledge of NDiaye's own identity, implicating her in the text. Halfway through the story, the narrator describes "Une domestique à la peau très noire"; she continues: "je remarquai dans un trouble sentiment de tristesse jalouse car j'aspirais violemment et sobrement, depuis que Maria Martinez s'était établie dans mon existence, à devenir une jeune femme noire" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 25). The narrator's race is not specified, but we know she is not Black and it is possible she is white — like the historical artists who depicted or captured Maria Martinez. This includes the French photographer Nadar, who took at least four portraits of a woman called Maria "sans qu'il soit possible de déterminer à quel moment ni pour quel motif — hormis le lien avec sa couleur de peau — cette dénomination d'Antillaise' a été ajoutée" (42). The existence of

[10] We can keep this in mind when reading NDiaye, whose naming is very exact: in *Ladivine*, for example, one of the protagonists is referred to as "la servante" by her daughter, rather than by her name or as "mother" — though the book bears the mother's name (*Ladivine* Sylla). In *La Naufragée*, the protagonist calls herself "femme-poisson" and she is not named by herself, the other characters, or by the narrator.

Nadar's photos and their inclusion in the work lets the narrator describe Sachs as Martinez and imply the two are the same without directly asserting this claim, maintaining the ambiguity so characteristic of NDiaye.

NDiaye transports Martinez to the 21st century via the third Marie/a, Marie Sachs. Sachs is also a singer, whose identity and presence become clearer to the narrator as the "figure de Maria Martinez, qui ne quittait jamais mon esprit, devenait brumeuse comme si soudain j'avais eu moins besoin d'elle" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 17). She performs et "elle avait dénudé ses épaules, sa poitrine, sa taille. Elle avait le teint sombre, sa peau brillait comme du cuir de qualité. Elle avait des seins de taille moyenne, haut plantées." NDiaye is describing Nadar's photos of Maria Martinez, reinforcing the shared identity of Martinez and Sachs. Sachs sings a song written by Théophile Gautier for Maria Martinez, and NDiaye quotes: "Si je suis noire, je suis femme / Le public français est galant […] Messieurs, soutenez aujourd'hui / La renommée hospitalière / Accueillez la pauvre étrangère" (29). A few pages later, the narrator (playing with the theme of *un modèle noir*) describes Maria Martinez as a representation of "le type africain le plus parfait; peau d'un noir éclatant avec des reflets de feu, taille élevée et souple, bras magnifiques, dents d'ivoire, regards de feu" (31).

The verse by Gautier comes from the play *La Négresse et le pacha* (1851). The role of "la négresse," Mariquita, was written specifically for Martinez with the goal of showing off her talents: "Cette folie orientale, qui rappelle la fantaisie turque *de l'Ours et le Pacha*, avait pour excuse et prétexte de servir de cadre à la noire figure de la señora Maria Martinez, une chanteuse négresse d'un rare talent et d'une originalité des plus attractives" (Spoelberch 493). Mariquita appears at a slave market and the marchand d'esclaves — played by Gautier himself — announces "Elle vous chantera tout ce que vous voudrez" (Spoelberch 486). Mariquita responds "J'obéis."

Before her verse, the chorus sings: "Livrons-nous à l'allégresse, Car le caprice est battu: Cette excellent négresse, Fait triompher la vertu!" (491) This scenario demonstrates a hostile and false welcoming, which calls into question the notion of a "modèle noir": Gautier (and his contemporaries) find Martinez to have a "rare talent and originality" and they place her in the context of performing as the "excellente négresse" in the context of a slave market, which Gautier commands. Mariquita incites an uncontrollable passion in the men watching her: "je n'y résiste plus! Je suis transporté. Subjugué! Pour toi, belle noire, je donnerais mes richesses, mes immeubles, mon peuple, mes femmes et Palmyre par-dessus le marché!" (488). To Gautier and his contemporaries, Mariquita is a *modèle* of exemplary Blackness: talented, exotic, but not immediately from Africa (she is not being sold into slavery in this scene) as they believe her to come from Havana. She cannot speak for herself, performing a white French man's dialogue to describe the French public as gallant and welcoming. The Chorus announces she has restored virtue, despite not having any agency in this theatrical depiction.

There is a specific foreignness (and a performance of that foreignness) that is acceptably exotic to the public: Senegalese but French; African but Cuban. There is also an example of intellectuals who speak *for* the artist, such as critics who focus on NDiaye's identity despite her preference to not continually address this topic, and Martinez's identity replaced with "Mariquita" in a performance of Gautier's words. Singers and actors often perform the words of other writers, of course, but given that this play was created with Martinez in mind, Gautier is specifically speaking for Martinez and directly replacing Martinez with his conception of her.

Using a verse that occurs adjacent to a slave market presents a dilemma in the exhibition (and is a theme and setting which will recur in the context of *La Naufragée*, where the protagonist is too exotic to be accepted by the general public, who deride her as a dangerous

siren, but is sufficiently talented so as to remain valuable to the artist): the white intellectual, artist, or museum-goer viewing the historical model without their consent ("j'obéis"). Maria Martinez cannot independently hold power at a slave market, and deceased and often nameless subjects (such as we will find in JMW Turner's painting *The Slave Ship*) do not have autonomy in a museum exhibition. There is not a simple solution to this problem, as to not hold such an exhibition would not necessarily rectify the voicelessness of the artistic subjects, and NDiaye's fiction thus brings awareness to this dilemma[11] by demonstrating the inherently unequal relationship between the Black subject/artist and white viewer (the exhibition itself additionally published accompanying materials, including a thorough catalogue, historical documents, and accompanying new art, including Black artists as model *and* creator).[12]

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[11] And the Musée d'Orsay's approach was not without critique: *Art Forum*, for example, proposed the historical contextualization was superior at the Columbia University Wallach Art Gallery's version of this exhibition, titled "Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today," curated by Denise Murrell, based on her dissertation "Seeing Laure: Race and Modernity from Manet's Olympia to Matisse, Bearden and Beyond." The New York exhibition used a map of Paris to show the proximity of Manet's studio to Black Parisians, highlighting that Black Parisians such as Martinez were not just subjects or actors, but were themselves artists and participating members of Parisian society. The Musée d'Orsay replaced the map with a timeline, which begins at the end of the 18th Century — the beginning of the abolition movement in France, applying a problematically selective pen to France's colonial history. This timeline "meant that the exhibition began by positioning Afro-descended people as de facto slaves awaiting liberation" (Butterfield-Rosen). Museum-goers could even purchase notebooks embossed with the 1794 decree of abolition — an unquestionably odd choice to turn the abolition of slavery into profit, especially in the context of such an exhibition.
Helen Lewis's very recent article "The Guggenheim's Scapegoat" provides an excellent and thorough analysis of the dilemma of museums with fraught histories and funding sources, the "liberal" posturing of arts, and contemporary politics: "Admission prices for students and senior citizens are subsidized by black-tie galas. Exhibitions that comment on poverty are supported by the country's most successful capitalists. Most major art museums are very white; in 2018, only 4 percent of American curators were Black, according to a survey by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The collections are slowly diversifying, but only 1.2 percent of artworks across 18 major American museums are by Black artists, and the big crowds still flock to the Great White Males: Picasso, Monet, van Gogh, Pollock, Warhol. All of these realities have left museums struggling to speak with authority on the legacy of slavery and segregation, the toll of police violence, and racial injustice" (Lewis).
[12] In an interesting meta-musical turn of events, Martinez has been further musically and theatrically reincarnated via adaptations of *Un pas de chat sauvage*: the playwright Blandine Savetier adapted the novella for the Théâtre National du Strasbourg in 2022, and the Centre Pompidou's Musique-Fictions series (which combines a contemporary text with an original music composition) adapted the work in 2021, composed by Gérard Pesson and adapted by David Lescot.

As Marie Sachs allows the narrator to better understand Martinez, this story helps the reader to better know NDiaye. NDiaye's narrator writes that she understands that she (Sachs) believes Maria Martinez would have been happier had she not been Black, but "ne peut-on supposer que, femme blanche, elle n'aurait obtenu nul triomphe avec ses chants déconcertants, son jeu original, l'excentricité générale de sa personne? Il fallait […] qu'elle fût noire pour qu'on appréciât son talent particulier, elle était ainsi moins jugée comme femme que comme phénomène, n'est-ce pas préférable ?" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 40). This quotation is particularly interesting in the context of NDiaye's description of her own participation in the project (and descriptions elsewhere of her general identity as a writer) as well as her partial visibility in text: she is not a character, but the reader must have knowledge of NDiaye to realize this. Given the first-person voice and the research project undertaken by the narrator, it would be very reasonable to presume NDiaye and the narrator are one in the same until the narrator describes herself as wishing to "devenir une jeune femme noire."

In their article "*Un pas de chat sauvage*, l'étrangeté et la cruauté dans l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye," Waddah Saab and Blandine Savetier offer an optimistic reading of "la beauté des textes de Marie NDiaye," a *beauté* that persists despite the extreme cruelty in which she immerses her characters, who exist in a space of amorality. They conclude "nous traversons des abîmes de vilenie pour accéder à ce qui nous reste d'amour ou de compassion pour les êtres humains" (Théâtre national de Strasbourg 217). Research and historical documents do not manifest Maria Martinez's voice, and the narrator views repurposing Martinez's life as a transgression: "comment oserais-je inventer ce dont je n'avais pas la connaissance. Voilà bien ce qui entravait l'historienne et professeur que je suis"; she asks herself: "N'était-il pas de mon

devoir de protéger Maria Martinez des portraits falsifiés?" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 9). And Marie Sachs asks the narrator why she is interested in the life of Maria Martinez: "Elle me disait que, si son propre intérêt pour Maria Martinez n'avait pas à s'expliquer car il était, venant d'une artiste noire, naturel et même inévitable, elle ne comprenait pas encore ce qui, moi, me motivait quel souci avais-je de la vie de Maria Martinez, de ses bonheurs et de ses tracas, en quoi une telle existence me concernait-elle suffisamment et assez profondément pour que j'aie tant à cœur de la faire connaître?" (34). The narrator responds: "quelle sorte d'âme était celle de Maria Martinez?" (35), acknowledging that no amount of research could answer this question and the only option was to take Marie Sachs as "matière de mon travail, de ma curiosité, de mon émotion, de ma tendresse." The narrator writes: "Elle était élégante et raffinée dans un genre inhabituel, qui forçait à l'observer, à réfléchir, puis à décider s'il s'agissait bien d'élégance, de raffinement. Il paraissait ensuite évident que oui c'était trompeur, cela n'avait pas été évident mais fort incertain, contestable dans l'intimité des appréciations de chacun" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 28). The narrator's own thoughts and questions give a reader (and the exhibition viewer) a starting point at which to view the photographs.

The reader (and especially the white reader) must confront their interest in: 1) the exhibition, 2) its artistic works (as well as the creators *and* subjects of those works and the relation therein), and 3) Marie NDiaye. Transporting Martinez to the 21st century via Marie Sachs suggest society has made very little progress in how it views "le modèle noir." Like Maria Martinez, Marie Sachs is subject to exoticizing and reductive portrayals by others: Maria Martinez was photographed by Nadar; Marie Sachs is studied and written about by the unnamed white narrator. She is, like Martinez, a subject for the white creator and, like Martinez, will disappear. Yet, though this novella cannot embody Martinez/Sachs, it gives her some agency by

acknowledging this incapacity and by not pretending to speak for her (creating a new character instead) — unlike, for example, the song written for Martinez by Gautier. NDiaye's writing offers an alternative means of acknowledging and analyzing difficult histories without (re)erasing the agency of victims of western and colonial violence. I argue that NDiaye's fiction, its reception, and her own presence *in* her stories (such as the correlation between *Marie* NDiaye and *Maria* Martinez/*Marie* Sachs, and the parallels between the unnamed narrator and her own research on Martinez) illustrate the ongoing psychological violence caused to the marginalized stranger. Over a century after the era of Maria Martinez, Marie Sachs, and Marie NDiaye exist in a France which still treats the talented Black woman artist as an "étrangère."

V. Trois chapitres (dé)moralisants: Project Structure and Themes

Important to our discussion of the ethics of fictional and historical depictions of alterity, and of the capacity of a reader to connect with and respond to fictional cruelty, are questions of narrative positioning. NDiaye often employs a third-person voice with internal focalization (comparable, perhaps, to Flaubert's style in *Madame Bovary*, but not identical[13]) to depict the inner sentiments and thoughts of a character without directly occupying the first-person thoughts of said character. In Gérard Genette's terms, the majority of the narrations we will encounter (all except *Un pas de chat sauvage* and Part I of *La Naufragée*) feature extra-

[13] We can also compare Flaubert's statement "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" to NDiaye's statement "Lorsque j'écris j'ai l'impression d'oublier sexe et âge. J'ai l'impression d'être à la fois enfant lorsque je parle d'un enfant, homme lorsque c'est un homme — je me sens aussi proche de Lagrand que de Rosie. […] Je suis un être humain qui écrit" (Asibong and Jordan 192). NDiaye's statement creates more separation between the author and the characters than does Flaubert's, but still suggests she is aligned with the characters while writing (an interesting juxtaposition, with Emma being Baudelaire, and NDiaye becoming her characters. Becoming more closely aligned with the identities of her fictional characters while writing implies they *do* actually reflect a specific experience of identity; that is to say, she does not describe an alignment such as "more closely aligned with Lagrand's personality than Rosie when I speak as Lagrand"; rather, she describes becoming a man when she is writing as a man, implying a different voice and experience between her characters because of identity.

heterodiegetic narrators: narrators who are not protagonists or characters but who know the plot. The narrations are interior focalizations, meaning they voice the consciousness of the character despite not inhabiting the first-person point of view of the character (concepts and terminology from Genette, *Discours du récit*). We will also trace magic and transformation, other elements which exists in much of NDiaye's work and which occur in each of these books as the women are part-animal or able to fully transform into animals. This technique helps illustrate themes of bicultural and/or biracial identity, as is symbolized by the hybrid *femme-poisson* of *La Naufragée*. We will additionally discuss themes of motherhood, parenting, and the experiences of the children of these fraught families, and the ways in which psychological fragility is inherited across generations. Finally, as with *Un pas de chat sauvage*, which somewhat alludes to NDiaye herself as it depicts the experience of researching and writing, we will discuss the ways each of these works might reflect the experiences of either NDiaye herself or the creator more broadly, which will reach a peak with *Ladivine*, the most personal work amongst this selection.

Chapter 1: Monsters, Memory, and Strangeness: Ethics of Representation in *La Naufragée*

We will begin by looking at Marie NDiaye's little-known and out-of-print 1999 novella, *La Naufragée*, a text written in distant and ahistorical collaboration with the 19th-century English Romantic artist, JMW Turner. *La Naufragée* is the first of several works NDiaye has written which collaborate with or use works by other artists, nearly all of which contain visual elements. *La Naufragée* is a story about a mermaid (or "femme-poisson," as she refers to herself and as we will refer to her) who mysteriously washes ashore the Seine in Paris. It is illustrated by a selection of Turner's paintings, with an image on each left page and text on each right page.

After frightening the visitors of Les Halles in Paris, who believe she is a dangerous siren, the femme-poisson is taken captive by an unnamed painter, who forces her to accompany him

to England by boat, where he will attempt to distill her beautiful music into his paintings. *La Naufragée* functions as an allegory of bicultural identity (femme-poisson), as well as slave markets and the forced capture and transport of enslaved individuals. There is an additional historical reference in Turner's paintings, particularly *The Slave Ship*, which depicts enslaved individuals being thrown into the sea in a depiction of (or allusion to, as the event is not named in the title) the *Zong* massacre of 1781, during which over 130 enslaved Africans were murdered at sea.

Similar to *Un pas de chat sauvage*, *La Naufragée* asks to what degree an artist can ethically and accurately depict the story of an historical figure, and if it is possible to participate in such a creation without exploiting the subject particularly when the subject has already been historically marginalized. And further like *Un pas de chat sauvage*, which engages with Maria Martinez while including traces of Marie NDiaye (as the researcher and writer), *La Naufragée* depicts and questions the act of creation (the artist attempting to capture the femme-poisson's voice) *as* it enacts the very transgression it questions (use of Maria Martinez's life; inclusion of JMW Turner's *The Slave Ship*). We discuss NDiaye's uniquely unsettling and effective character immersion and the way in which she depicts the subject/the creator/the product.

Chapter 2: More French than Others: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender in *Trois Femmes Puissantes*

We will continue to analyze the ethics of fictional depictions of trauma by engaging with NDiaye's portrayal of an ongoing contemporary political crisis. Published a decade after *La Naufragée*, *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) is a novel in three parts depicting three women immigrating between France and Senegal: the first, Norah, a French-born lawyer, must return to Africa to help her estranged father; the second, Fanta, immigrates from Senegal to France and finds herself underemployed and in an untenable marriage; and the third, Khady, loses her

husband, is expelled by her in-laws, and violently dies en route from Africa to France. Regarding Khady's story, NDiaye wanted "moins de romanesque, pas de magie ou à peine, mais une volonté de rendre compte, tout en faisant malgré tout un objet littéraire, pas un documentaire" (Clair 29). When asked about its political message, NDiaye responds that it is political if interpreting "le mot au sens très large […] Mais est-ce que ce n'est pas plutôt une morale plutôt qu'une leçon politique? […] si ces gens fuient la misère, elle a une raison, elle est liée à des politiques, à des gouvernants" (29). In a later interview, NDiaye says that when writing, "I'm thinking of my characters, in what sort of situations I can place them, and, above all, about the moral issues they'll have to face, as opposed to the meaning these moral issues might have in contemporary society" (Maurin). These responses encapsulate the tension of *Trois femmes puissantes*, and the conflict in her views of her own work. Is there a *morale* in *Trois femmes puissantes*, which provides no authorial commentary on the tragedies it is depicting, and no solution to or resolutions of the women's struggles?

On the *puissance* in the title, NDiaye says: the reader should see these women as "des femmes puissantes, parce que peut-être ce n'était pas absolument évident quand on allait lire leurs histoires respectives. Donc, d'une manière, je force l'interprétation, j'impose un point de vue de lecture" (Clair 28). Despite NDiaye's claims that the work is not political, there is a political position to be found here, given western colonialist anti-immigrant policy. NDiaye forces her reader into an ethical corner to demonstrate the immorality inherent in politicizing immigration: can the reader support a political debate which results in a death such as Khady Demba's? NDiaye presents meaning in perseverance and forces the reader to foment a sense of (in)justice in the absence of ideological and ethical clarity by carefully subverting trust between the reader and genre, historicity, and the text.

NDiaye challenges the reader to either welcome her vulnerable characters or perpetuate the harm they are experiencing, to which there is only one reasonable outcome (innocent Khady could not in any reasonable interpretation warrant the violence inflicted upon her by both her family and the strangers she meets en route to France). The reader is also implicated in this violence, especially if we bear in mind the questions from *Un pas de chat sauvage*: Marie Sachs asks the narrator about her motivation for studying Maria Martinez; what is the motivation of the reader of *Trois femmes puissantes* and does it affect their perception of these women? Is the reader welcoming ("accueillez la pauvre étrangère") or exploiting ("broyer la vie d'une autre femme") the *trois femmes puissantes*?

Further, we must account for the timeline of the novel's publication in NDiaye's shift to being more overtly political in her work. As previously quoted, NDiaye became more aware of the question of Blackness upon the publication of Pap Ndiaye's *La Condition noire* in 2008; *Trois femmes puissantes* was published in 2009. NDiaye notes that she feels "étrangère à cette problématique" because of her own career trajectory ("je n'ai pu ressentir la moindre méfiance"), but she is nevertheless interested by and more aware of it. *Trois femmes puissantes* is in some ways the natural result of this increased awareness: not just the psychological experience of *méfiance*, but the *méfiance* articulated.[14]

Chapter 3: Fragile Identities and *récits souterrains*: Cycles of (Non)belonging in *Ladivine*

[14] Marie NDiaye's preface to *La Condition noire*, the short story "Les Sœurs," is also extremely (and uncharacteristically) clear in its depiction of race and identity: it is the story of two sisters who have a Black father and white mother. Paula is able to pass for white, while Victoire is dark-skinned. Victoire is considered to be very unattractive while Paula is considered beautiful and lucky. Paula becomes obsessed with the idea of race while Victoire goes on to find popularity and have a successful career. The narrator (Bertini, a classmate) falls in love with Victoire and one day tells her about the discrimination he has seen her suffer. Victoire reluctantly acknowledges this racism and rejects Bertini.

Finally, chapter 3 will bring us to a more personal side of these experiences as we discuss *Ladivine* (2013). *Ladivine* depicts four generations of women navigating Blackness and biracialness in contemporary France, each to varying degrees of success. Like *La Naufragée* and *Trois femmes puissantes*, it is a story about migration, inheritance, and a shared family consciousness, depicting mistreated women who occupy a tenuous space in society because of their identities. And, like *La Naufragée* and *Trois femmes puissantes*, its victimized women will escape by transformation (or disappearance). We will discuss the limits to such resistance in the conclusion. These themes manifest in *Ladivine* alongside commentaries on motherhood, patriarchal western violence, and judgments of racial and national identities. *Ladivine* demonstrates the *morale ndiayïenne* of women who persevere in the face of psychologically untenable situations, where perseverance might actually result in a decision to abandon or disappear from one's life, and where there is a certain *puissance* in choosing to inhabit one's actual identity.

In an interview with *Radio France Internationale* following the publication of *Ladivine*, NDiaye noted that she is not "un écrivain engagé. L'écrivain engagé a tendance à être peu subtil car il doit faire passer un message […] il n'y a pas de place pour l'ambiguïté. Moi, au contraire, j'aime travailler dans l'ambivalence parce qu'il me semble qu'elle nous fait réfléchir davantage" (Chanda). In this same interview, NDiaye said that the women in *Ladivine* were not victims, and had not been maligned due to racial prejudice: "ce serait trop délibéré… trop volontairement politique." The women in *Ladivine* find themselves lost "face au mystère des origines. Le personnage central du récit, Clarisse Rivière, ne sait pas qui est son père. Sa mère lui a menti et c'est de ce mensonge originel que découlent les drames, les complexes, les abandons successifs." This quote implies a fraught division between race and family origins that seems

unique to a universalist conception of race and, perhaps, to NDiaye's personal experience, having spent decades rejecting identification as a Black woman writer and linking herself to her French mother.

About the difference between *Trois femmes puissantes* and her earlier and even darker works, NDiaye feels "plus libre maintenant d'écrire sur éventuellement des bonnes choses, et que tout ne soit pas nécessairement sans issue. […] je pense qu'il n'y a que la maturité qui apporte ça: l'idée que l'on puisse aussi faire des choses intéressantes qui ne relèvent pas du désespoir le plus absolu" (Clair 29). We will interpret *Ladivine* as a response to a social system which depends upon racial and cultural identities at the same time it misinterprets and places harmful and subjective values on such definitions. *Ladivine* is also a story about inheritance and shared culture, and will bring us full circle to *La Naufragée* as it interprets intrinsic cultural belonging and consciousness which transcends generations and geography.

The novel has clear parallels to NDiaye's own life, and that given the surrealist and fictional nature of her works that *are* classified as autobiographical (most notably, *Autoportrait en vert*), it is not unreasonable to draw comparisons between the author's life and the novel, and such connections engender a richer understanding of NDiaye's work by showing how they relate to and respond to the world they depict and transform. The femme-poisson disappears alone and without a trace after she has been forcibly transported to a new country; the *trois femmes puissantes* transform into birds after they likewise find themselves geographically displaced; the *Ladivine* women transform *towards* each other. And in *Ladivine*, Marie NDiaye transforms her own life into fiction.

VI. Proposal for Additional Analysis

I propose improving and growing this analysis by engaging more thoroughly with *Autoportrait en vert*, in the context of unreliable first-person narration and the concepts of "narrative intimacy" and theories of attribution. Such analysis, in which the narrator both is and is not NDiaye, would be extremely productive in dialogue with *Un pas de chat sauvage*, in which the narrator again appears to be NDiaye until mid-text. There is also great potential for further analysis of NDiaye's catalogue in the context of eco-fiction, particularly *La Naufragée*. Mermaids appear to be underrepresented in eco-fiction studies, and the importance of the *poisson* aspect of the femme-poisson's physical and psychological identity would be generative in considerations of the animal *vs* the human in metamorphosis, as the femme-poisson depicts a context in which metamorphosis and return to the human is not the goal nor the result. Additionally, in a related but separate direction, I propose that an analysis beginning with *La Naufragée*'s depiction of the body, and extending to NDiaye's broader catalogue would be productive in the context of disability studies.

There is often a physicality to the psychological suffering of NDiaye's protagonists (such as a persistent sickness in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and the vomit in *Papa doit manger*). There is also an inclination in reviews and scholarship to frame certain experiences of being "othered" using language associated with disability or ableism, such as schizophrenic, epileptic, or experiences of psychosis. There are certainly elements of disability and illness at play in NDiaye's works (such as the postpartum depression we find in *Ladivine*), and NDiaye's tendency to not name these illnesses mean that, when they are described, they are sometimes used as allegory for difference or strange narrative quality (I use the adjectives "schizophrenic" and "epileptic" rather than nouns, for example, because reviews use this language to connote a frenetic confusion and not a literal illness). Disability is an aspect of identity, and analysis of NDiaye's

use of the body and of the untenability of inhabiting a body which does not function within a certain societal framework (particularly in the context of "invisible illnesses," which research shows are medically ignored or incorrectly attributed to psychosis at much higher rates in women) would be a productive addition to analysis of the "invisible identities" in NDiaye's catalogue, particularly given the colloquial language of illness (ex. schizophrenic) sometimes used to describe her characters by readers, and the psychological illnesses which the characters do experience (such as the postpartum depression in *Ladivine*). Additionally, public health research in the United States[15] demonstrates that the chronic trauma of experiencing racism can concretely affect health and well-being. Individuals who experience racist encounters and microaggressions have higher incidents of certain illnesses (such as heart disease and diabetes), and this is particularly true for Black mothers (Roeder), who face higher rates of medical racism (and these harms extend to children) (Cognet) (Singh). Much of the illness in NDiaye's writing

[15] I have not found significant equivalent research on manifestations of racism in certain aspects of health (such as in the form of increased rates of hypertension, kidney disease, and/or diabetes) on the topic in French society, but propose that we can extrapolate from research in the United States and elsewhere (there are comparable studies in Canada, for example [Tetley and den Boar]) that racism affects physical and mental health regardless of borders (and there is recent research on the psychological effects of racism in France [Djeghnoune] [Garnier] [Shehrazad]). However, certain effects of race in a healthcare setting are surely different, given the contrast between French healthcare and American healthcare (for example, Black maternal mortality rates are lower in France than in the United States, and the United States has the highest Black maternal mortality rates among peer nations by a large margin, being nearly twice as high as rates in France). Studies show that nonwhite individuals do experience medical racism and Islamophobia in France (particularly immigrants from Africa or Overseas France and Muslims [Rivenbark and Ichou] and there has been increased attention paid to this topic during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affects nonwhite communities, particularly poor and migrant communities, in both the US and France) (Pedram). I note this to recognize that statistical evidence may be different between the US and France because of disparities in healthcare and insurance, and also simply due to the amount of research paid to this topic. I believe that studies on the effects of racism on health and on healthcare are nevertheless helpful because racism (and specifically anti-Blackness, which has the largest effect on healthcare in the United States) exists in both the United States and France. I should also note that, given the differences in discussions on this topic (which certainly reflect French attitudes toward race and censusing of race), it is likely these questions are not specifically at play in all (or perhaps any) of Marie NDiaye's catalogue. However, the tangible effects of racism on health support a reading of Marie NDiaye's catalogue that seeks to understand illness beyond allegory.

depicts or allegorizes physical manifestations of psychological trauma. This analysis would build upon my current project's discussion of allegorical and/or ambivalent alterity, which defines identity without naming it. It would also contribute to my discussion of narration by providing a new framework of language to interpret the psychological states of these protagonists (that is to say, is the language allegorical or is the character inhabiting a specific psychological state and/or illness).

VII. *(Auto)portrait ouvert*: Seeking an Impossible *sens final*

About the consistency of her subjects, NDiaye says "je décris les situations que je connais finalement. […] J'ai écrit beaucoup sur la famille parce que, pendant très longtemps, c'était un milieu qui m'était bien connu" (Clair 27). In *Un pas de chat sauvage*, the narrator asks, "comment oserais-je inventer ce dont je n'avais pas la connaissance, voilà bien ce qui entravait l'historienne et professeure d'université que je suis" (*Un pas de chat sauvage* 9). Through *La Naufragée*, *Trois femmes puissantes*, and *Ladivine* (and, of course, her very large body of work more generally), NDiaye meets the same fate as Maria Martinez: immortalized in the work (*Un pas de chat savage*) of another artist (the researcher), just as Martinez was first immortalized by the photographer Nadar and re-depicted by NDiaye herself in *Un pas de chat sauvage*. In each of these texts, the solution is to invent on the foundation of lived experience, and to use the uncanny or unreal (mermaids, women-birds, women-dogs) to create a world which is grounded in reality but which is not so identical as to be appropriative.

Andrew Asibong writes that "The reader's mad recognition of the NDiayean 'blank fantastic' is a double-edged sword: it may swallow him whole, or it may help her to grow and to relate" (Asibong 174), noting the potential to be overwhelmed by NDiaye's complicated and difficult narratives or to empathize. The experience of reading NDiaye mirrors the journey faced

by her protagonists as they seek belonging and closure in a world that will not claim them. This replicates the psychological journeys of her protagonists, who are desperate to understand their own origins. I will illustrate why I propose NDiaye considers herself a nonpolitical writer who is nevertheless very political, and why the reader is uniquely implicated in NDiaye's writing: her work depicts a cruelty that is almost neutral. The catch-22s we find in NDiaye's work are a logical reflection of the world she depicts. The absence and confusion characteristic of NDiaye's writing (the "NDiayien blank," as proposed by Andrew Asibong) creates a condition where the reader must speak back, intimating that witnessing and empathy are modes of reading but not agents of change or reasonable responses to contemporary systemic inequality (particularly when the reader is aware of the historical foundations of such inequality).

In her 2013 interview with *RFI*, NDiaye describes the fiction she most enjoys (the works of William Faulkner): "Je les lis et les relis, sans que je ne puisse jamais arriver à bout de leur mystère fondamental. […] Les livres qui me restent le plus profondément en mémoire sont souvent ceux dans lesquels je n'ai pas toujours tout compris ou dont je ne suis pas absolument sure du sens final" (Chanda). And here we find the central triumph and difficulty of Marie NDiaye's work: the experience of devouring such a vast oeuvre, of searching for a *sens final* that is very likely not there. Yet there is meaning to this incompleteness, to the act of reading, to the threads NDiaye has created between her writings and with her readers, and to the pleasure of exploring the mysteries therein and the knowledge that "une telle entreprise s'écoule sur toute la durée de la vie" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 35) both on the page and off, for "sous le réel, se cachent des mystères."

II. CHAPTER 1
MONSTERS, MEMORY, AND STRANGENESS: ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION IN LA NAUFRAGÉE

This chapter will examine *La Naufragée* (1999), a novella illustrated with paintings by JMW Turner, the 19th century British Romantic painter. I will begin by briefly discussing the place of this novella in NDiaye's larger body of work, as well as the rather unique (and now defunct) publishing house for which it was written, and follow with a brief presentation of its plot. I will proceed with a discussion of the artist JMW Turner and the way in which NDiaye has used his paintings to compose this narrative. Next, I will analyze the themes of otherness as presented in the character of the mermaid or "femme-poisson," and the possible connections between this figure and other mythical fish- (or bird-) women, such as Homer's sirens, the Nereids, the Haitian *sirène*, and Mami Wata, who is found throughout Africa. Finally, I will discuss NDiaye's choice to create fiction and fantasy (a thread we will follow into chapters 2 and 3) and what freedoms are created by this artistic decision and the ways such a decision engages with the historical and political nature of Turner's works.

In both *Un pas de chat sauvage* and *La Naufragée*, NDiaye bases historical or period narratives not on specific events or individuals, but on interpretations by other artists. Both works include protagonists who are also artists or creators (the writer protagonist of *Un pas de chat sauvage* and Martinez the singer, the painter in *La Naufragée* and the femme-poisson's musicality). NDiaye is writing about the relationship between history and art, as well as the act of creation and relationship to one's subject (the painter and the femme-poisson; Sachs and the narrator; Turner and the ship Zong), and the influence of an artistic work and also of interpretations of said work. *La Naufragée* and *The Slave Ship* both raise questions about who may speak for whom, the collective nature of history and art, as well as the way these topics vary

across cultures and historical moments. NDiaye's use of Turner allows for a strong metaphorical link to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, as Turner's *The Slave Ship* directly depicts an event from this era and route. It also serves to illustrate the transnational nature of the slave trade and this historical moment, and the fact that France also participated in the slave trade, and that France's colonial holdings are not absent from this history. Indeed, it is the colony of Saint Domingue, later to become Haiti, which the Zong believed itself to have reached.

La Naufragée was published by Flohic in 1999 and is presently out of print. Flohic was a publishing house established in the 1990s for the preservation and promotion of French patrimony and went out of business in 2006 due to financial constraints. *La Naufragée* was NDiaye's eighth published work, following the publication of six previous novels and one play. This novella brings to mind *Y penser sans cesse* (2011), a short book written in collaboration with the photographer Denis Cointe after NDiaye moved to Germany. *Y penser sans cesse* is a hybrid between a short story and a poem and chronicles a boy in contemporary Germany whose heart is inhabited by a boy deported from Germany during the Shoah. We can also consider *Un pas de chat sauvage* in this context. Like *La Naufragée*, both of these books are short novellas, and all three raise questions of narrative voice, historical perspective, the line between transcribing and translating history and appropriating personal stories, and the role of the artist therein. In turning these stories and images into fiction, NDiaye affirms that there is value and importance in acknowledging and utilizing true stories but that the artist cannot speak directly for other voices (or perhaps even for herself: NDiaye's most overtly autobiographical work, *Autoportrait en vert*, is also fictionalized and also contains photos that do not directly depict the text). In *La Naufragée*, NDiaye creates an allegory for the Transatlantic Slave Trade by fictionalizing the life of JMW Turner (though he is never named) as well as the context for the Turner paintings she

has selected for this book, which includes the 1840 oil painting *The Slave Ship*, a work inspired by the murder of 132 enslaved in 1781. Both *La Naufragée* and *The Slave Ship* speak to the complexities of representing an historical event and the ethics of speaking for individuals who have been silenced or erased by history.

La Naufragée supports political interpretations of NDiaye's larger oeuvre and specifically supports finding depictions of the experience of hybridity or *métissage* in her narratives, despite NDiaye's assertion that she does not write from or about a particular experience of identity. *La Naufragée* alludes to specific historical events and locations (such as the Jardin des plantes and slave markets), collaborates with an actual historical figure (Turner) and is very clearly a depiction of the experience of occupying two physical identities (fish and woman). NDiaye depicts the untenability of universalism brought on by a physical identity that does not, to a certain general public, match one's presumed cultural identity. Further, *La Naufragée* depicts the absence of a singular cultural identity caused by displacement (a theme that will also be reflected in *Ladivine*), as well as a mythology created by transnational communication and artistic and mythological collaboration.

I. Summary of *La Naufragée*

The first part of *La Naufragée*, which takes place in Paris, is divided into "Quai de la Seine," "Les Halles," and "Jardin des Plantes"[16] and is written in a first-person narration from the perspective of the femme-poisson. The fish-woman wanders the streets of Paris in the 1800s, struggling to see and walk on land. The fish woman does not know where she is or how she has

[16] Jardin des plantes likely alludes to the human zoos in Paris, in which Africans were displayed as "exotic exports" of France's colonial empire. Structures reminiscent of buildings in French colonies were built and kidnapped people were displayed as oddities. Remnants from these zoos remain in Paris, such as in the Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale near the Bois de Vincennes, where structures meant to depict French colonies remain intact.

arrived there. She cannot communicate or ask because her voice does not work outside of water and she cannot easily move about the world because her body is not suited to land. The following page (page two of the text) is accompanied by the book's first painting and the first interaction between text and image (figure 12 in Appendix B), *Yachts Approaching the Coast*.

She awakens near Les Halles, in a blinding light and in a poisonous water that her body can't tolerate. She continues to seek seawater, feeling deeply dehydrated and suffering as her skin begins to dry out in the hot sun and "l'air jaune."[17] Beside this passage is an enlarged sun from *The Slave Ship,* the sky and water yellow and orange, as she feels lost and ostracized, and also begins to deteriorate physically. She is thirsty and "sèche et bouillante dans la fournaise" (25). The femme-poisson continues to suffer from heat, dehydration, and the drying out of her body, but is eventually overcome with a song despite her physical deterioration. The people around her are indeed captivated by her song, as if she were actually a siren, but when she stops singing to ask for water, she once again finds herself unable to verbalize her request, and the people surrounding her become violent (unlike traditional siren myths, in which the siren herself attacks a vulnerable prey). The passerby refer to the femme-poisson as a siren and she collapses from dehydration and fatigue.

In the next chapter, titled "Jardin des Plantes," the femme-poisson continues begging for water and is remarked upon by the humans wandering about her, who continue to gawk and who deny her water. They scream "La sirène est enragée! Est-ce que la sirène pleure? Faites-la taire, vite!" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 43), beside a detail from *Rising Sun in the Haze*, 1807 (Appendix B, figures 14 and 15), in which a fisherman looks upon a heaping pile of fish, falling out of a

[17] Colors are frequently used by NDiaye to depict a psychological disease or distrust. Yellow appears especially regularly in *Rosie Carpe* (2001).

basket and drying on the shore. The humans do not remark upon the femme-poisson's needs, do not seem to understand her request, and ignore her need for water to physically survive as they are too fearful of her. She resigns herself to death, saying that she will no longer move "ayant pris congé de mon existence de femme-poisson, m'étant dit à moi-même adieu" (45). In the second chapter, the last chapter from the first-person perspective of the femme-poisson, she once again awakens. She is covered in blood and tries again to ask the people around her for water, and once again starts singing involuntarily, captivating the passerby surrounding her. They overwhelm her when she stops singing and she jumps into the river, and it seems as if she has died: "je ne bouge plus, ayant pris congé de mon existence de femme-poisson, m'étant dit à moi-même adieu" (45).

Chapter II, titled "Les Halles," is accompanied by the painting *Sun Rising Through Vapour (Fishermen Cleaning and Selling Fish)* (1807) and begins our encounter with the painter and slightly overlaps with the end of part one, giving an alternate perspective of the femme-poisson's experience. In chapter II, the narrative perspective changes to the third-person, describing an unnamed "il" walking through the market in the early morning. He brushes against the femme-poisson's body and he is alarmed by the feeling of her skin and the fact of being so close to her. Not immediately realizing she is part fish, the painter is captivated by her unique face. He watches her struggle walking and collapse before beginning her song. He suddenly notices her fish tail and, believing her to be a siren, covers his ears. Yet he continues to be captivated by her not just by her music, but by his overwhelming desire to capture her song, so that his art may have the same effect on its viewers as the femme-poisson has on the marketgoers. The chapter ends abruptly as the femme-poisson is carried away by marketgoers and the artist decides he must follow.

In the final chapter, the artist goes to the Jardin des plantes, where the femme-poisson is being held captive by the humans who fear her, and he trades all of his books to purchase her. He takes her to a ship departing for London, and she travels with him in a cage. He asks her if she wants to return to the sea, knowing she cannot survive in freshwater. He tells her he will release her into the sea only if she will sing for him. She sings, and he is once again mesmerized, deciding he cannot return her to the water until he has distilled her song into a painting, after which he promises to return her to the sea. They reach his home and studio in London, where he keeps her in a large container that he refills with water each day. He produces the best work of his life, but still finds himself dissatisfied with this work, as it doesn't fully capture the sentiment he feels when he hears her sing. He asks for another month of her time (without giving her the choice to say no), and at the end of this month, he again asks for more time. The story ends suddenly, with two sentences stating that he has died and the femme-poisson has disappeared.

II. The *musée secret*: Flohic and the Dialogue Beetween Image and Text

La Naufragée was published in the series "Musées secrets," a collection directed by Catherine Flohic in conjunction with her husband, Jean-Luc Flohic. Catherine Flohic, an author and editor, went on to launch Argol Éditions in 2005, a publishing house that focuses on the creation of poetry, literature, and art[18]. The "musées secrets" collection combines visual and written art, letting an author choose an artist and giving them 40,000 characters with which

[18] The website reads: "Argol propose de nouveaux espaces de création, provoque croisements, correspondances, rencontres, entre l'écriture et l'image, témoignages et réflexions vives dans tous les champs de la littérature, de l'art. Création poétique et littéraire, entretiens monographiques, projets personnels, Argol fédère de grandes voix et des découvertes de la création littéraire contemporaine » (Les Ateliers d'Argol). It has collaborated with the Musée Rodin and most recently published *À mon seul désir* by Yannick Haenel in 2019.

to explore their selected pieces an exercise in curation, biography, art analysis, and fiction. The books are not writings *about* the artist or artworks, but are inspired "par son œuvre, qui fonctionne en écho avec les illustrations, soit à partir de la vie e l'artiste, soit sous la forme d'une fiction." The only constraint is the length of the work, and Flohic's goal was to provoke "vraies rencontres," suggesting a meeting between the artist and the author as well as the reader and spectator, and seeking to somewhat recreate the experience of being in a museum and also of encountering an individual's personal artistic taste, and not just a museum exhibition with specific curatorial goals. "Musées secrets" is in reference to "musée imaginaire," a concept from the 20th-century French Minister of Culture, writer, and theorist André Malraux, describing the way in which reproducing art and curating a personal collection of art objects can widen access to art and facilitate the relationship between the artist, their work, and the collector or spectator (Allan). Malraux describes the "musée imaginaire" as being the largest collection of images known by humanity. There is a universalizing aspect to this concept, denoting a broad historical lineage not constrained by one culture or nation.

In her article about the series, Anne Reverseau describes the collection as one of "hybrid objects," where the image is co-present with the text: "musées secrets" is neither a series of art criticism nor a series of writing about art, but a series in which authors have freedom to create works in which the image and text are interdependent as they individually interpret this notion (though some authors did choose to write about the artistic works in a way that is more closely aligned with the criticism and description typical of a museum catalogue or magazine than NDiaye's fictional project); that is to say, the series is unified in its conception but not in its implementation or subject (Reverseau). They depict one individual's experience of witnessing and processing a body of art, telling us as much about the writers as they do about the artist in

question. The series thus puts a diverse selection of writers and artists in dialogue by allowing them creative freedom within the boundary of a literary exhibition: each book is unto itself an exhibition of sorts and, together, the books create another type of exhibition.

The collection included authors from several countries including Tahar Ben Jelloun (Morocco; the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru; the German artist George Grosz), and Paul West (United States; the Swiss artist James Ensor). The editors sought to mix cultures and art across nations, which explains the choice of a British artist for NDiaye's project: Flohic aimed to "mettre en contact des horizons étrangers, et le raffinement que cet effort suppose," which places the collection in a perspective of "une culture placée sous le signe de la mondialisation, entraînant l'utopie que draine tout internationalisme dans un grandiose marché éditorial que prospecte aussi le consultant en marketing qu'est Jean-Luc Flohic de son premier métier."[19] In the context of this collection, *La Naufragée* presents NDiaye as a universal author, in dialogue with another European artist from another time period rather than, as she is so often depicted or understood, as an African author in dialogue with her own life story.

La Naufragée is thus particularly interesting in this context of voices, history, and permission to represent (or speak on behalf of) another because of the series it was written for "une collection littéraire. La légende, c'est la photographie et pas le texte" (Arambasin 98). This suggests a reversal of the usual relationship between description and art piece. It is the image that gives meaning and context to the narrative, rather than words serving as a description of the piece. This destabilizes our concept of images as a narrative device as well as the actual

[19] The quote continues: "Demain toutes les frontières seront ouvertes: faire connaître aux États-Unis, par exemple, le regard d'un romancier allemand sur un peintre espagnol, est la meilleure façon de s'en réjouir. […] Cette interactivité culturelle est un 'concept' ajoute Flohic, terme qui donne le ton d'une ambition de la collection à laquelle est offerte la possibilité d'étendre un esthétique compare par l'édition, à l'horizon d'une culture quelque peu 'mondialiste' cependant" (Arambasin 98)

context of the works in question, which are placed in a different historical context. Without descriptions of JMW Turner's paintings, for example (such as date, location, and material), they become illustrations for NDiaye's fantastical story about a mermaid. *Yachts Approaching the Coast*, which does not itself contain geographical signposts, becomes associated with Paris when printed in "Quai de la Seine."

Outside of this museum series, the majority of Flohic's selections are explicitly historical or educational, and the catalogue includes works such as *Le Patrimoine de la RATP*, *Le Patrimoine de la poste*, *Le Patrimoine des communes des Côtes-d'Armor*, *Le Patrimoine des communes du Nord*, amongst other similarly themed and titled books. It is interesting to consider this transnational and multi-art series amongst a list of works that promote French heritage. To support the goal of merging global cultures, Flohic did not market the series as an "art book," and chose to cap the price of the books at fifteen euros (despite the color reproductions of the paintings which typically result in a much higher price point — and perhaps this has something to do with the press's rather short lifespan) so as to put "la fiction littéraire au niveau de la peinture des maîtres" (Arambasin 99) in terms of accessibility. The analysis of the project concludes:

> Dans les limbes de l'art, cette masse de chefs-d'œuvre ébauchés, arrive 'au seuil de l'existence' a peut-être la chance de rencontrer l'écrivain qui en fera sa réalité, une utopie réalisée, une histoire de l'art *littérairement* prophétique. […] la discipline ne serait plus l'histoire d'un passé mais d'un avenir content dans les images, capable de configurer 'l'expérience' d'un présent continuellement en excès sur lui-même,' et plus encore 'l'histoire des attentes collectives' comme en instance d'être apaisées. (104)

NDiaye fulfills this assignment by looking at both the past, present, and an allegorical space in between, situating Turner's 1840 painting in a Paris of an unspecified year to depict a transnational history of slavery, migration, and mixed identity.

III. Seascapes and Slavery: NDiaye's JMW Turner

JMW Turner (1775 1851) was known for his landscape and waterscape paintings, and all of the paintings selected by NDiaye contain water. The work on the cover, Turner's *The Slave Ship* (currently held in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) had a tangible effect on the abolition movement and continues to be invoked in social justice art.[20] The largest collection of Turner's work can be found at the Tate Britain, where the Turner Collection is held. Turner was famous during his own era, with his first exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London occurring in 1790, and he has remained critically important in the centuries since his passing. Turner was called "the father of modern art" by John Ruskin and his work famously pays very close attention to details of light and color, which is often also true of NDiaye's writing, which is very conscious of color.[21] NDiaye uses different aspects of Turner's paintings to illustrate what is happening in the accompanying text by selecting paintings which can be interpreted as allegorically similar or which directly match the story's use of light and color. The story might

[20] Claudia Rankine, for example, ends her 2017 book *Citizen* with *The Slave Ship*, explaining in a talk that the "equation between whiteness and the Black body as property of whiteness is the equation we can't get out of… I wanted to end [*Citizen*] with Turner because people always say, 'Well, I didn't know. It wasn't my intention. I wish I had known more about this…' But Turner knew better in the 1800s. He knew better. And this is 2015" ("Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*," Radio Open Source).
There is also M. NourbeSe Philip's poem "Zong!," a book length poem that utilizes words from the actual court trial and which has been performed as a theatrical piece: "Through fragments of voices, shreds of memory and shards of silence, "Zong!" unravels the story that can only be told by not telling." An alternative to NDiaye's fictionalized fantasy, M. NourbeSe Philip demonstrates the voicelessness of these victims by highlighting the words spoken around and about them. Find "Zong #1" in Appendix B.

[21] As Shirley Jordan notes in "Washes and Hues: Reading for Color in Marie NDiaye," NDiaye experiments with color to unsettle the reader's notions of race as well as color processing and emotional interpretations of color. Jordan writes that "NDiaye's chromatic experimentation as a lynch pin for asking questions about emotion, memory, the senses, perception, self-perception, creativity and mental disorder" (Jordan, *Washes and Hues* 1). The color language in *La Naufragée* creates a narrative directly connected to Turner's paintings and also works to engender emotional responses in the reader by connecting the reader to synesthetic responses by the femme-poisson: "Her awakenings take place at the extremes of emotional distress and at the conjunction of Blackness and light: they are a sequence of 'réveils noirs et semblables, dans la même lumière aveuglante' [23]. The vision of the woman-fish, with its revolutionary dissolution of forms, is precisely that of Turner" ("Washes and Hues," Jordan 7). Jordan posits that NDiaye's use of color raises questions about shared perception and sensation, directly related to ethics of empathy.

not literally depict the act of fishing, for example, but an image of fishermen will accompany a painter capturing the femme-poisson's voice, symbolizing the theft of her life.

Nineteen pages of *La Naufragée* display details of paintings (see Appendix B). Turner's large, sweeping nature images become more closely associated with the text as NDiaye chooses focal points, often drawing the reader's eye to the human subjects of a piece, who might otherwise be lost to our vision in the vastness of Turner's depictions of nature. The bodies in *The Slave Ship* are not immediately clear, for example, as they are lost to the water. NDiaye pulls the faceless and nameless subjects (which are not always human) from the larger image, in a parallel gesture to her inhabiting the perspective and history of the fish-woman as a voice for a certain cultural and historical experience. This act highlights the potential silencing nature of Turner's painting as well as its capacity to illustrate this loss of identity; that is to say, Turner cannot be more specific in his depiction because the faces and names of these individuals are largely unknown.

We can compare NDiaye's choice of Turner's paintings with the role of Nadar's photos in *Un pas de chat sauvage* by discussing the cover painting, *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon coming on)*, 1840. NDiaye continually uses the updated shorter title *The Slave Ship* without the parenthetical. This is a problematic title, given that the people were thrown overboard the ship that inspired the work were not all already dead they were murdered. By contrast, NDiaye's title suggests there is an *after* to these deaths and places the focus on the victims rather than the murderers. This painting depicts a ship passing through a storm, bodies visible in the water; it is featured four times in *La Naufragée*, each time zoomed in on a different detail. Turner's painting depicts the true historical event of the ship Zong, a

boat that transported enslaved Africans who were deliberately murdered by the crew so as to profit from an insurance claim against their lives.

JMW Turner's historical awareness is a fraught topic, as he did participate in and support abolition, but his patronage did not always come from abolitionist sources. Turner was well-funded during his lifetime and some of that money came from wealthy individuals with ties to the slave trade and ancestral ties to political inequality. To be sure, this is not wholly surprising given the era, but it is nevertheless worth noting that the money that funded Turner's work was connected to the ideas and practices some of this work criticized (for example, Sir Richard Hoare was a patron of Turner, and Hoare's family had ties to the Royal African Company, the South Sea Company [which included slave-trading in its dealings], the East India Company, and his family owned enslaved individuals) (Nouss). As Laura Brace points out in "Fallacies of Hope: Contesting Narratives of Abolition in Turner's Slave Ship," it is difficult to make an argument that a painting created in the year 1840 was apolitical, because this was an extremely important year for the abolition of the slave trade. Discussing research by John McCoubrey, Brace further notes that depictions of wrecked ships — that is to say, vessels carrying enslaved individuals destroyed by natural causes — was a frequent metaphor for abolition by divine intervention (Brace 10).

Additionally, Turner's work is currently stored in a museum named after Henry Tate, who had many business connections to the slave trade. The Tate initiated an investigation into these ties, which was accomplished by Center for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership at University College London, and the findings are shared publicly on their website. Henry Tate was not a slaveowner, having been born after the Act for the Abolition of Slavery, but his business interests had a legacy in the slave trade (for example, the sugar industry, which

utilized slavery throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). The report also lists examples of artists who are fundamental to the Tate's core collection and whose work was funded by patrons with connections to the slave trade, and lists JMW Turner as one of these artists due to his ties to John Fuller, who commissioned Turner's Sussex Sketchbooks. Fuller owned an estate in Jamaica and was both a slave owner and a vocal supporter of slavery. Finally, Turner himself invested a small sum in an estate in Jamaica in 1805 which used the labor of enslaved individuals. Turner thus was generally believed to have been liberal in his beliefs and causes[22] and supported abolition, but also personally and tangentially profited from the labor of enslaved Africans.

Public criticism of the Zong massacre contributed to general support in Great Britain for the abolition of slavery, which was abolished in Britain in 1833. Turner was inspired by the event and the subsequent court trial addressing the incident, after the ship owners were sued by their insurance company (Brace). The insurance case came to trial in 1783. A Dutch ship owned by a company based in Liverpool sailed from the West Coast of Africa to Jamaica with 470 enslaved individuals and seventeen crew members registered on board. This was 295 more Africans than the ship could legally carry, with regards to regulations for ratios of crew to individuals as "cargo," and it was also far more people than the ship could physically hold. A navigational error mistaking what was actually the intended destination of Jamaica for Saint Domingue meant the ship did not reach its destination and could not reach land for drinking water or food before supplies became dangerously low. The ship was already rife with illness, with more than sixty African individuals dying of disease before the murders, and an estimated

[22] Turner is noted to have supported parliamentary reform, freedom of expression, religious toleration, Greek independence, and abolition (Brace 21).

120 individuals were also extremely sick with dysentery and other illnesses. Allegedly to prevent illness spreading to the crewmembers and also to preserve remaining supplies, the captain decided to throw 132 living captives into the ocean.

The trial did not concern the morality or legality of murdering 132 people or the violation of safety measures which resulted in such an excess of people on the ship, but addressed the insurance agency's suspicion that the captain had thrown the captives overboard to intentionally collect insurance money, as he would have lost money had the enslaved individuals died of illness and dehydration (these "natural causes" would not have been covered under the insurance policy). The dispute was thus concerning whether it was literally necessary to kill the Africans to save the lives of the seventeen crew members on board. Legally, captains were allowed to throw cargo overboard to lighten a ship if it was deemed necessary (such as during a storm). The ship crew argued that throwing enslaved Africans overboard was an equivalent act, as they were classified as "goods and property." The judge of the trial agreed with this assessment. The trial was subsequently addressed by the public abolitionists Grainville Sharp and Olaudah Equiano, which caused the trial to be noticed more broadly, and it was eventually covered in national newspapers, with Sharp and Equiano arguing for murder charges against the crew. These murders were cited by abolitionists and contributed toward the Slave Trade Act of 1788 which limited the number of Africans a ship could transport, a law that preceded abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

NDiaye's selection of a European artist, and the fact of his depiction of the murder of enslaved Africans to construct an allegory for enslavement and forced migration, highlights the Eurocentric vision of empire that dominates historical accounts of the slave trade. Critics of Turner propose that the artist took advantage of a horrific historical event and the broader

context of slavery for aesthetic value and artistic capital, due to the way the painting fits into Turner's larger body of work of seascapes and the fact that the subject matter is not immediately obvious. The bodies are hard to see and the immediate subject looks to be a storm, and the event in the title remains ambiguous (a "slave ship," as opposed to drawing awareness specifically to the ship Zong or to murder). Others note that this is not Turner's only political work (he also painted, for example, *Northampton*, a work that celebrates the victory of the Whig candidate Lord Althorp) and that his general social group was known to be "enlightened" and liberal, especially for their era. Given this fact, the ambiguity of the subjects can be interpreted as a means to make a broader point about the slave trade; to point to a specific event that was not singular.

Yet it is difficult to ignore the ways in which the painting nevertheless aestheticizes a massacre and thus raises ethical questions about appropriation of someone else's trauma so as to make a political point (a question that we will return to in the following chapter in relation to *Trois femmes puissantes*) and the commodification of that trauma. What does it mean to find beauty in a depiction of such violence? Like the other works in *La Naufragée* (and Turner's collection on the whole), *The Slave Ship* plays with light, color, and distance in striking ways. Especially when viewed in the context of a broad collection of nature paintings, *The Slave Ship* appears at first to be a depiction of a vivid sunset. Noticing the bodies requires time spent with the painting, and understanding who they are requires context.

Sarah Fulford's article, "David Dabydeen and Turner's Sublime Aesthetic," considers poems that have referenced or directly described Turner's painting and provides a helpful framework of "bracketing" and the potential need to separate visual pleasure from subject matter in order to enjoy certain artwork. Referencing Kojin Karantani's "Uses of Aesthetics:

After Orientalism," Fulford suggests that *The Slave Ship* "can only please the aesthete if his appalling seas filled with dead slaves are bracketed in a way that cannot be achieved by Raine when she tries to respond to Turner's art in her poem, "Turner's Seas" (Fulford 11).[23] Raine offers a critical interpretation of Turner's painting, and NDiaye enrichens the work by individualizing its context. *The Slave Ship* depicts the "unrepresentable other," which is "integral to the discourse of slavery where alterity is obscured so as to heighten the fear of an unimaginable darkness" (Fulford 4). NDiaye creates a representation of the unrepresentable: the femme-poisson, the fish market, the voyage and entrapment. How does this project differ from Turner's? Does it bear the same ethical questions with regards to aesthetics, and what ethical implications do Turner's paintings hold when used as NDiaye uses them, and when she actively changes their context (doubly so, in that the presumed purpose and meaning changes halfway through the text)?

Given the evenly divided structure of the book, with a painting on every left page except the first, the thirty-seven images by JMW Turner (twenty-five unique paintings, with six paintings repeating, further solidifying the paintings as illustrations rather than artistic references, as NDiaye chooses details in the repeated paintings to accompany her text as opposed to commenting on the paintings) are also a part of the story, and his name is included on the front cover as well as the title page, giving the impression that he is a co-author of the work. The book also includes a section titled "Biographie: Joseph Mallord William Turner" after the narrative concludes, which features a 1799 autoportrait and a chronology of his life, which

[23] "We call them beautiful,
Turner's appalling seas, shipwreck and deluge
Where man's contraptions, mast and hull,
Lurch, capsize, shatter to driftwood in the whelming surge and swell."

includes time in France. Turner first travelled to Paris in 1833. He stops his academic work in 1846: "Bien que riche, célèbre et reconnu, Turner cesse toute fonction à la Royal Academy et se retire dans une petite maison louée à Chelsea sous un faux nom." He dies in 1851: "Mort de William Turner le 19 décembre. […] Lors de l'inventaire de sa maison, on découvre, outre des tableaux, quelque dix-neuf mille dessins, aquarelles, gouaches, esquisses à l'huile. Il lègue l'ensemble de sa collection à la nation anglaise" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 85). This description of the end of Turner's life seems to align with the abrupt ending faced by the fictional artist in NDiaye's story, during which the artist's home is sorted through by friends and previously undiscovered works are found.

NDiaye has chosen not to mention *The Slave Ship*, abolition, the ship Zong, and the continued importance of both. Like NDiaye's other works, which allude to real life political and cultural strife (ex. immigration and racism, as we will find in chapters 2 and 3), NDiaye makes her subjects quite clear but sticks to rather vague markers which mean both specific *and* decontextualized interpretations of the work are extrapolation on the part of the reader. In being about France and about the slave trade but not about the French slave trade, NDiaye avoids providing a narrow historical scope to slavery, which extended beyond British, French, and African borders.

Critics describe Turner's later work as being more liberated and intense (the Tate and the Getty held, for example, an exhibition in 2014 titled "Late Turner: Painting Set Free"), which is interesting in the context of the NDiaye's novella, in which the artist produces the best work of his career at the very end of his life, after capturing the femme-poisson. Similar to the stylistic division in Turner's lifework, there is also a division between the initial interpretation of the paintings in *La Naufragée* and how they appear to be upon meeting the character of the painter.

In the first half of the book, the paintings appear to loosely represent what the femme-poisson is seeing; they do not depict the literal setting or scenes, but there are similarities between the painting titles and/or the colors in the text and the colors in the images. In the latter part of the second half of the story (not the entire second half, as it is not immediately known that the unnamed "il" is a painter), after we meet the artist and learn of his profession, we might interpret the paintings as being the work of the artist, and the artist's interpretation of the femme-poisson's voice. This new awareness also encourages a reinterpretation of the first half of the book, as we wonder if the images are indeed what the femme-poisson saw, or merely the painter's interpretation of what he assumed she must have seen.

As Marie-Hélène Inglin-Routisseau notes in an article on *La Naufragée*, we can also consider this work an expression of Horace's "as is painting so is poetry" ("Ut pictura poesis," from *Ars Poetica*) and Baudelaire's notion that "les coloristes sont des poètes épiques" ("La Naufragée, une écriture de la derive," Inglin-Routisseau 59). The equality between the paintings and the text creates a kinship between words and image, and I would add Plutarch's comparison of poetry and visual art (attributed to Simonides, and paraphrased by Horace in *Ars Poetica*):

> Simonides, however, calls painting inarticulate poetry and poetry articulate painting: for the actions which painters portray as taking place at the moment literature narrates and records after they have taken place. Even though artists with color and design, and writers with words and phrases, represent the same subjects, they differ in the material and the manner of their imitation; and yet the underlying end and aim of both is one and the same; the most effective historian is he who, by a vivid representation of emotions and characters, makes his narration like a painting. (Plutarch 346)

La Naufragée supports the painting/poetry duality by adjoining the visual to the poetic and giving each equal status, and by reproducing visual elements through words; that is to say, not describing the image but writing as if with a paintbrush. Laura Jensen addresses Turner's own view of the dichotomy between painting and poetry, citing Turner: "Thus Painting and Poetry,

flowing from the same fount mutually by vision, constantly comparing Poetic allusions by natural forms in one and applying forms found in nature to the other, meandering into streams by application, which reciprocally improved, reflect, and heighten each other's beauties like... mirrors" ("Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France," Jensen 65, quoting John Gage's *JMW Turner: A Wonderful Range of Mind*). Turner viewed painting and poetry as companion arts, and NDiaye's use of Turner's work aligns with his philosophy: reciprocally effective, and acting as a mirror, the image providing an improved reflection of the words (and vice versa).

Turner's paintings provide us with a resemblance of the text, and NDiaye creates a resemblance of the painting — if not the literal image itself, then the expression (tools, colors, and methods) of that image. Plutarch's idea is more commonly quoted as "Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting with the gift of speech." We can twist this language and say that in the context of appropriative representation, the artist's painting is *silencing*, and the femme-poisson's poetry is *absent* the gift of speech, as the tools of the artist do not align with the message of the femme-poisson. The end and aim of both are not the same: the femme-poisson seeks freedom; the artist seeks to constrain her. If the literature (the song) is narrating a pure emotion and cultural memory, the actions of this painter, who witnesses but refuses to internalize that song as he keeps her captured, cannot portray the emotion or memory.

We can also consider the language of opacity in *La Naufragée*. The story describes an "eau opaque" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 39). This brings to mind Édouard Glissant's theories of opacity from *Poetics of Relation* (Glissant). Glissant proposes acceptance of the impenetrability inherent in communication between cultures and/or identities, as opposed to minimizing difference in the formation of a singular transparent identity which the other must inhabit by

assimilating. This is applicable to the femme-poisson, whose body is not able to be "transparent" or assimilated into the world she has become stranded in, and whose voice is moving but impenetrable (nonreplicable) for the artist.

The argument about superior forms of art is, of course, long and complex, from Plato's notion of a false simulacrum, to Aristotle's view that the art as imitation is human nature and is productive, to the centuries of interpretations since. Even a simple understanding of these terms gives us an instructive framework for *La Naufragée* and the *musées secrets* collection on the whole: a true manifestation of Baudelaire's notion that "les coloristes sont des poètes épiques." We might also consider the musicality of the femme-poisson's poetry. Music as a medium presents more opportunities for interpretation than do painting and poetry, because the primary mode of experiencing music is a subjective interpretation by another individual or ensemble. We can consider instrumental music, which has no intrinsic semantic value as it is devoid of an articulated subject. We can say the same for the artist's relationship with the femme-poisson's song, which he cannot understand: he is experiencing a purely emotive response to an abstract artistic expression.

Aristotle proposed that visual art imitates signs of emotions, and that music is an imitation of the emotion itself, and as in many cultures and civilizations, music was a means of passing down history. This was true in Ancient Greece, when music was not yet notated (remaining a purely oral practice until the imperial era). Musical transmission of memory connects myth to history, a tradition maintained by NDiaye the combination of sirens, true locations (Les Halles), and Turner's references to history.

I have previously referred to the femme-poisson's song as poetry in the poetry/painting dichotomy, because the first-person narration exists in a duality of image and words, and the

reader cannot hear the music. We can additionally consider the femme-poisson's song as a musical utterance, an imitation of signs of emotions (emitting freely from her despite her intentions, and communicating something she literally cannot verbalize), and a transmission of inherited cultural knowledge ("souvenir d'histoires ancienne"). The artist experiences an oral distillation of her experience but is incapable of reproducing it because he can paint the events of an experience but not their absolute feeling. The use of these three artistic mediums thus allegorizes a limited or incapable empathy: the artist feels the femme-poisson's song but it does not change him. In fact, he is so touched by the song that he becomes even crueler to the femme-poisson, keeping her indefinitely trapped and limiting *her* capacity to emote and feel.

There is also the aforementioned artistic quality of the language used alongside the paintings in the femme-poisson's first-person narrative. This is not unique to *La Naufragée*, as NDiaye's writing makes frequent and significant use of color in depicting emotional and physical atmosphere, but this style takes on an additional significance when viewed alongside the images it seems to match. The first page is the only page without an image (it is completely blank); the second page of the narration, in which the femme-poisson says "mes yeux s'ouvrent malgré moi," shows Turner's *Yacht Approaching the Coast*. Only when the femme-poisson has opened her eyes on land do we see images. The description of the sun once again serves to situate this fictional narrative vaguely within the paintings of JMW Turner, which NDiaye has transformed into a universe for these characters. The painting beside this opening paragraph, in which fishermen sell fish as the sun rises (*Sun Rising through Vapour*, 1807), reinforces the allusion between markets selling enslaved Africans and the femme-poisson. NDiaye goes a step beyond evoking colors, and references the materials used to paint, such as a "lumière de zinc," and refers to the water as oily or containing gas, denoting Turner's oil paintings: "la promesse

rouge du soleil d'été loin là-bas sur l'eau grise […] seul point parmi les ombres envahi d'incertitude, baignant dans une clarté trouble, une lumière zinc" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 9). Zinc oxide is a material in white paint ("Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France," Jensen 42), and NDiaye uses this ingredient to great linguistic effect: despite the sun being red ("promesse rouge du soleil"), the shadows are bathed in a white "lumière de zinc." In paint, chemical processes cause white zinc to erode oil paint, and white zinc is particularly harmful to paints with organic foundations, such as madder lake (red) and Prussian blue (blue) (Douma). (Incidentally, madder lake was the color used for French military uniforms and Prussian blue is also known as Parisian blue.) The "clareté trouble, une lumière zinc" is a pure and clear white which causes cracks and drying in other colors of paint such as blue, mirroring the air and sun dehydrating and hurting the femme-poisson, who yearns for (blue) sea water (not "l'eau gris").

When the narrative switches to the third-person perspective of the painter, the painting on the left page is *Soleil levant dans la brume (pêcheurs nettoyant et vendant le poisson)*, which marks the interpretative shift of the paintings, and the idea of the painter capturing the femme-poisson's story. Instead of being a representation of what the femme-poisson is seeing, the painter is translating the song (her ancestral history and life experiences) as he hears it changing and repurposing it into an object, like the subjects of the painting who are cleaning and selling the fish for profit, or like Turner taking the specific event that was Zong massacre and creating *The Slave Ship*.

This division forces questions of historical representation and aesthetic accuracy, as discussed with regards to *Un pas de chat sauvage*, though the implications and motivations are, of course, different in *La Naufragée*: who is qualified and who is "allowed" to tell whose stories?

Can (and should) the narrator of *Un pas de chat sauvage* understand and distill Maria Martinez's story; can (and should) the painter capture the voice and story of the femme-poisson? The same can be asked regarding Turner. The conclusion of the story would suggest that it is indeed impossible to capture the voice of the forcibly silenced, but NDiaye's own involvement and fictional story suggests that there is, sometimes, purpose in retelling and reimagining. NDiaye is herself using the voice of another artist in the creation of her narrative, and does so in two different fashions by including the actual work of Turner and by imagining him as a fictional character. The story of the artist becomes a fantasy, like in *Un pas de chat sauvage* where it is never quite clear whether we are witnessing a ghost or a reincarnation or a trick of time. The femme-poisson separates us from real references in this narrative (how did a mermaid get to Les Halles?), but upon further analysis of possible mythological influences, serves as a link between historical events (the Zong massacre), art that precedes this book (Turner), the way stories and histories are transformed by cross-cultural mixing or (possibly unethical) trespassing (the capturing of the femme-poisson to create the fictional paintings; the use of the Zong massacre as inspiration for *The Slave Ship*).

IV. La femme-poisson, la femme puissante: Hybridity, Identity, and Belonging

We are introduced to the main character's differences on the first page, though her identity is not immediately clear: she mentions her "chair de poisson" and "chair de femme," and we can assume she has a mermaid-like physicality because her "chair de poisson" is the bottom half of her body: "je ne pourrai demeurer longtemps sur ce sol inégal et douloureux à ma chair de poisson. Ma chair de femme est peu sensible aux menues attaques, tandis que le bas de mon corps, nerveux, élastique mais également tendre d'une consistance délicate (chair peu serrée comme celle du cabillaud), souffre du moindre caillou sur lequel il repose" (*La*

Naufragée, NDiaye 8-9). The femme-poisson cannot "demeurer longtemps sur ce sol inégal et douloureux," meaning it is the environment that is inappropriate — not the body. Using "chair de femme" instead of a term more gender neutral suggests an ambiguity or neutrality to her bottom half; she is half woman and half fish, and her "chair de poisson" does not have a gender.

She is also, of course, in a marketplace where fish are sold; her half-fish body and the stalls around her that sell fish make the market an allegory for the human markets where enslaved individuals were sold. Even when she is disguised and the marketgoers mistake her for a woman, the sellers around her complain about the "vilaine femme" who is always hanging around, despite the fact that the femme-poisson is clearly suffering and is of no danger to anyone. She is villainized for her fish half but always designated by her woman half (villainous woman and siren). She begs for water as her "peau de poisson" becomes irritated. She hides herself alongside a wall, where — despite her inability to speak — "un vieux chant de femme-poisson" comes to her, despite her not previously knowing the song, which she believes to be from ancient legends, and which comes from [elle ne sait] quel recoin de [son] esprit fatigué" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 29). The use of "chair" in both descriptions creates a sense of animality and inhumanity in her general appearance and being and also creates a sense that she is purchasable and edible, an aspect that is reinforced by the paintings of fishermen cleaning and selling fish and the fact that she is walking in a market, amongst odors of ripe fruits. As opposed to using "body" or solely referring to her "queue" (a word which is often sexualized but which has a certain semantic ambiguity throughout the novella) and her "moitié de femme," she is described as "flesh," which dehumanizes her body and suggests that, like the fish being cleaned and sold by the fishermen, she is able to be cleaned, mutilated, and eaten. And like the text itself, her form is divided into two distinct sections and types of being. The femme-poisson

insists upon this: while others around her refer to her as a siren, she ignores "ce mot sirène, n'ayant jamais été qu'une femme-poisson."[24]

Amongst NDiaye's works on the whole, it is notable that the femme-poisson does not refer to herself as a sirène and includes "femme" in her self-designation, as NDiaye makes frequent use of animals and of humans turning into animals — but in *Ladivine*, there is not a femme-chienne, nor is there a femme-oiseau in *Trois femmes puissantes*. She asks the fish around her "Où est la mer, je vous en prie?" but the fish around her avoided her as if she were "une femme complète." This solidifies her hybridity, her specific identity as "femme-poisson,"[25] and the problems it will cause her: neither adequately fish nor human. The venders continue calling her a "sirène," while the narration continues referring to her as "femme-poisson," and the artist compares her to a Medusa, after he buys her and takes her to the water (which might also bring to mind Mami Wata, who had serpentine associations). The narration sometimes also refers to the femme-poisson as "la femme," especially in relation to the ground (for example, "il tira la femme sur le sol," as if she becomes une femme the farther she gets from the water). It is not

[24] "Siren" can also be used in exoticizing ways that depict the woman in question as a foreign seductress. We might consider, for example, the famous Josephine Baker film *La Sirène des tropiques*, in which a French man falls in love with Baker, playing not a mermaid but a dancer in a fictional colony. Bakers character, Papitou, follows the French man to Paris, where she learns he is engaged to a white French woman. She becomes a music hall performer in France.
To this point, as Jensen notes in her chapter on *La Naufragée*, the woman selling fish at this market is selling *maquereaux*, which, in its singular form, is slang for "pimp" ("Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France," Jensen 50). This sexualizes the existence and identity of the fish-woman while also being repulsed by her. Shirley Jordan additionally notes the sexual nature of "Saloperie de Léviathan" and "putain de sirène," aludding to "putain" (whore) and "salope" (tart) (Jordan 47).

[25] As Laura Bea Jensen notes, "NDiaye's neologism can be read as an attempt at symbolic language, the kind of Adamic name that contains the idea it conveys. "Femmepoisson" does not appear in dialogue, or in third-person narration. Its usage is confined to the narrator's first-person account of her experiences. But we must also understand this neologistic act of naming as a universalizing act. "Femme-poisson" is situated outside of history and geography" ("Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France," Jensen 49). The neologism will not be used in the second half, signifying this symbolic language has broken down because the artist's treatment of the femme-poisson is contextualized *within* history and geography.

clear from whom he purchases the femme; the text simply says "il était anglais et donna toutes les livres qu'il avait encore en sa possession afin qu'on la lui cédât" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 61). This paragraph is accompanied by the painting "Pêcheurs en mer," creating a further impression that the painter is capturing her as if she is an animal, an impression that continues during their voyage to London, during which she travels in a cage "comme un animal de compagnie, et c'est ainsi qu'il la voyait encore, comme une bête très légèrement humaine, que la nature avait doué d'une particularité dont il lui serait possible de tirer le profit le plus inattendu et le plus enviable" (61). While the femme-poisson defines herself as being both fish and human, the painter's language revokes the humanity she as assigned herself.

The femme-poisson suddenly remembers the ancestry of her song ("notre voix"): "Me revient le souvenir d'histoires anciennes d'un temps où je n'étais pas née ni ma mère ni la mère de ma mère, d'où provient le chant que je connais pourtant si bien et auquel je ne vois pas de fin, et ces histoires que je me rappelle à peine et auxquelles je n'avais pas supposé plus de vérité qu'aux légendes (c'est-à-dire une vérité si menue qu'on peut la compter pour rien) évoquent toutes l'enchantement mortel de notre voix" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 33). Her physical form and the use of song would suggest a connection to the siren myth in that the people around her are entranced by the song and extremely fearful of its power, and not having expected it and not knowing from where it originates the femme-poisson is in marvel at her song as well. We might consider here the most famous version of the siren myth, from *The Odyssey*. Homer did not provide physical descriptions of the sirens encountered by Odysseus, but in ancient Greek mythology, they were part bird and part woman. They appeared in many pieces of Greek literature in addition to the *Odyssey*, including works by Euripides, Hesiod, and Sophocles. There are varying familial origins and physical descriptions, and thus feel especially relevant to

the femme-poisson whose story is not entirely known to her and which oscillates between truth (the painting and the Zong Massacre) and legend (the fact of being part fish).

In addition to this link between the femme-poisson and Homer's sirens, NDiaye has included *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* (1829), which depicts standing on his ship and mocking the cyclops Polyphemus, who he has blinded. In the complete painting, there are two ships, crew members, sea nymphs (nereids), and Polyphemus is vaguely visible throwing boulders at Ulysses and his crew. NDiaye has included just part of the sun, a large rock in the sea, and fish; on the following page, she has cropped the image to depict just the nereids and the front of the ship. Like the sirens, the nereids also have enchanting singing voices, but are beautiful and kind, rather than being seductive temptresses. The nereids are painted as if they are semi-transparent giving them a mystical quality as compared to the solid ship behind them. While the names of the depicted nereids are not known, one of the "historical" nereids, Galatea, was loved by the cyclops Polyphemus, and thus it is possible she is part of this group. Galatea, whose name means "milky-white," was the nereid of sea foam, the importance of which we will return to when discussing the femme-poisson in relation to the little mermaid.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is tempted by two sirens who take the guise of beautiful women and who enchant passerby with their singing voices, luring them in to their death. Odysseus wishes to hear the sirens' song, which promises worldly knowledge of what is to come, but has been warned of their danger, so has his crew tie him to the ship and put beeswax in their own ears. Hearing the song, Odysseus finds the sirens beautiful and tries to sail the ship towards them; the sirens appear monstrous to the rest of the ship's crew, who are able to avoid the temptations as they cannot hear the song. Like Odysseus, the painter in *La Naufragée* finds himself entranced by the femme-poisson's song, though the femme-poisson is not trying to

tempt anyone — she is simply trying to find water. And whereas the sirens offer a history of the Trojan War and all worldly knowledge, the femme-poisson's knowledge is also foreign to her, as she is overtaken by a song of her ancestors. Additionally, the painter trades *his* knowledge for her; rather than using money or trading his artwork, he purchases her by giving all of his books to the vendor. She is called a "sirène" by the people at the market around her, who shout "La sirène! C'est la sirène! Hou! La sirène chante" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 35). The chapter ends with the question: "Que fait-on, vraiment, de ma part d'humanité?"

The femme-poisson also refers to her ancestors as femme-poissons: "Je ne suis plus très jeune, car toutes les femmes-poissons ne sont pas jeunes" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 13); and later: "On respecte tout particulièrement, chez nous, les femmes-poissons d'un certain âge. Mais ici? Et que fait-on de ma moitié d'humanité?"[26] (19); and again: "C'est d'une sottise bien propre aux femmes-poissons que d'imaginer que je ne serai pas vue parce que je ne bouge pas" (15). This implies a people or species that are specifically *femme* and *poisson*, as opposed to something more gender neutral like human-fish. Additionally, while there are some stories about male mermaids or sirens (including in Greek mythology), these beings are typically female. The use of "toutes" femmes-poissons (and, of course, the *femme* in the term) implies it is a gendered species. The femme-poisson does not speak of an homme-poisson, however, the poisson part of her form is genderless, or possibly implicitly masculine: "une queue de poisson qui traînait à terre, dépassant de la longue loque qu'elle portait comme une robe — une queue grisâtre, tout empoussiérée, à peine reconnaissable comme telle, mais dont la vue fugitive, associée aux

[26] There is also "the mermaid question," in which belief in "monsters" (which sometimes included individuals with disfigurements) raised questions about human nature and hybridity (Laurent). In saying she is not a siren, she is a femme-poisson, the femme-poisson affirms that she *is* hybrid.

premiers sons qu'il entendait, lui donna l'envie de s'échapper, pour sa sauvegarde" (51). This precedes "les épaules nues de la femme [...] le cou frêle, bizarrement long, les seins tout ronds de fillette aux tétons à peine rosés, les grands bras fins, toute la peau d'une suavité" (63).

The extremely differing reactions to the femme-poisson as femme and the femme-poisson as poisson further highlight the perception that her difference renders her inhuman, despite her partially human body: "Plein de repulsion, il la lâcha" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 65). He is horrified each time he notices her animality, but it would also seem he is repulsed by realizing she is not as "womanly" as he at first interprets her to be, with the soft and more typically feminine descriptions of her form being eliminated when he becomes aware of the genderless *queue*. He is repulsed by her fish body and also by his initial reaction to her. He remarks that her "peau de poisson" is linked to her "chair humaine" without a clear division. NDiaye oscillates between "peau" and "chair" when describing the femme-poisson's body, and the choice to use "peau" here underlines the fluidity of her nature and form and the way in which her fish and woman portions connect "sans ligne apparent" (though, linguistically, they are connected and separated by a hyphen).

The painter is repulsed by his initial reaction to her because, without clear division between her animal form and her human form, between her *peau* and her *chair*, and between her femininity and her gender ambiguity, he is entranced and possibly attracted to all of the above, having not immediately differentiated between her seemingly opposing elements. It is almost as if he feels he has been tricked into liking or appreciating her. He becomes increasingly disgusted by her after she has spent more time as his captive and become seemingly more fish-like, perhaps due to his heightened perception of her difference, as well as the way she becomes more animalistic (to him) the longer she struggles. The longer she is kept from water, the more

she needs it, and her queue becomes increasingly the focus of his attention, as opposed to her "singular face": "La queue grise reposait au fond du banquet, plus répugnante, plus pénible encore à regarder pour lui maintenant que, mouillée, elle ressemblait si bien aux gros harengs qu'on vendait à la criée, en bas de la rue" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 79). Her "peau blafarde" trembles from too much time in the water but "il ne savait que faire." When describing the femme-poisson's tail, the painter does not (despite having previously used the word), say siren or mermaid tail, but specifically "fish tail."

This narrative perspective also describes the femme-poisson as "une bête très légèrement humaine," and the artist travels with her "dans une malle, comme un animal de compagnie." To the artist, in the process of sailing from Paris to London the femme-poisson neither in the water (poisson) nor on land (femme) but a ship's cargo (alluding to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, though here the journey is between France and London, highlighting the fact that these issues were present in Europe as well as the colonies and the interconnected nature of abolitionism[27]). Aboard the ship, the femme-poisson is *une bête* that "la nature avait douée d'une particularité dont il lui serait possible de tirer le profit le plus inattendu et le plus enviable" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 61). Her particularity is not just the fact that she is half fish and half woman, but also her song, which originates in her difference, sharing the culture and history of ancestors that she does not know. The song is taken advantage of by the painter, to whom this difference and ancestry seems profitable.

The femme-poisson refers to herself not as part-human or half human, but as having "une moitié d'humanité." This underlines the allegorical meaning of the femme-poisson, as it

[27] The UK, France, and the US abolished slavery at various points between the late 1700s and mid 1800s, often multiple times, either because as slavery returned post-abolition to ensure economic success or because abolition occurred in different years based on the specific state or colony.

is her history, culture, and ancestral people which separate her from humanity, and from which the artist wants to profit, an interesting contrast to the rejection of the femme-poisson by the market sellers. She is violently rejected even when she is read as being a woman (and neither her ethnicity nor the ethnicity of the people around her is specified), bringing to mind questions we will revisit when discussing *Trois femmes puissantes* (and specifically the story of Khady Demba): who is deserving of empathy and compassion? Who is allowed to migrate? And what becomes of these individuals in limbo, neither where they belong (the sea) nor where they have been displaced (Paris) but aboard a ship sailing for London.[28]

The femme-poisson is seemingly not deserving of either migration or a return to a place of belonging; as she articulates, she is too inhuman to be welcomed: "Hors de l'eau, je ne suis qu'un poisson" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 17). And yet in the water, the fish do not accept her because she appears human: "Dans ces eaux, je suis une femme complète, me dis-je, découragée" (23). "Ces eaux" implies another water where femmes-poisson exist freely and she is neither too fish nor too human. This quote also speaks to the question of hybridity and the possibility that this story is, in part, an allegory for being mixed-race or of mixed-heritage. The use of "femme-poisson" does highlight this duality, but the inability of others to see her as *femme*-poisson negates her capacity to exist as this hyphenate. Further, the story never portrays the femme-poisson's life before Paris, sharing only that she comes from a lineage of femme-poissons; we never see her in an oceanic setting where she might express a different culture and lived experience.

[28] We will find this again in *Trois femmes puissantes*, as well as in *Ladivine*, with all of these characters either struggling to settle (such as Fanta of *Trois femmes puissantes* and Clarisse of *Ladivine*); struggling in migration (such as Khady of *Trois femmes puissantes* and Ladivine Sylla in *Ladivine*); or struggling upon returning to one's heritage though we do not see this with the femme-poisson, whose ending is more abrupt (Norah of *Trois femmes puissantes* and Ladivine II of *Ladivine*).

We can derive an interpretation of being multi-national or multi-cultural from this depiction: the experience of being culturally French and/or of French nationally but being physically "other" or "foreign"; that is to say the experience of being physically incapable of assimilating into a culture that requires sameness: a figure of hybridity with mythical overtones. The femme-poisson is trapped in a foreign country and made to perform, her output appropriated and repurposed by an artist representing the dominant culture. The femme-poisson's voice — the purest expression of her grief and anxiety — is an inheritance. The "souvenir d'histoires anciennes" invokes the siren's song that depicts worldly ancient knowledge, and raises questions about the veracity of legend and of historical narratives, referencing ancient mythology and the genre-bending nature of this story as we will soon discuss, which is mythical, historical, and fantastical. She references only a mother and grandmother, as sirens were typically believed to be only women, though having a mother and grandmother creates a family line that sirens did not have. In Greek literature, they are typically the daughters of a Muse and a God, though the specific Muse and God depend on which text the siren is found in. The ambiguous lineage of the femme-poisson invokes other stories by NDiaye, in which there is often a mother figure but either no known father or a father who is known but has abandoned the family.

Additionally, it is implied that being "poisson" is not intrinsically degrading, but becomes so because of the interpretations by the market goers who surround her. She is offended that they wish her into the Seine, which is not where she belongs: "Si on peut me traiter aussi mal qu'en me jetant dans une eau faite pour les sauriens et les reptiles, et cela à la seule vue d'une partie de mon corps que n'en est pas la plus importante, qui n'est pas considérée" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 41), describing human legs as "un élément plutôt secondaire

de leur personne". The marketplace passerby refer to her as "Saloperie de Léviathan," interpreting her as a serpent and as evil. To the femme-poisson, her tail does not make her an animal (she is not a lizard or reptile); she is not inhuman, and the element that differentiates her from the humans around her is, to her, a neutral part of her body.

The femme-poisson *is* human, and this is what makes her particularly dangerous to those around her: they identify her as almost like them, until they see her tail; the artist, for example, finds beauty in her face and sees the pain in her eyes and wants to help her, until he is repulsed by her fish half. The femme-poisson asks what will be made of her "part d'humanité," after having affirmed that her tail is really not much different from legs. Is her woman body, or her consciousness (and her ancestry and song), which differentiates her from lizards and reptiles (animals that have tails *and* legs)?

Though she does not call herself a mermaid, the femme-poisson brings to mind the Hans Christian Anderson telling of the *Little Mermaid*. In Anderson's story, for example, mermaids live to be much older than humans, and the femme-poisson refers to her people as being generally much older than humans. There is also the matter of her song: the Little Mermaid trades her voice to travel to live on land. She is able to travel to the shore, where she is found by a prince, who enjoys her dancing and requests that she continually dance for him, despite the immense pain she experiences while using her legs, including while walking (similar to the femme-poisson, who does not gain legs, but does struggle physically on land). Additionally, the prince owns slaves who entertain him with performances at his palace. After the prince marries someone else, the Little Mermaid must murder the prince and his new wife, but finds herself unable to commit the act and instead throws her human self into the ocean, where she dissolves into sea foam.

The bodies in the water of *The Slave Ship* bring to mind the Little Mermaid who has flung herself into the water and, instead of turning into foam as mermaids do when they die, turns into a spirit. The word for foam, "écume," repeats throughout *La Naufragée* (almost as if it is a musical refrain) and thus creates another connection between these two stories. For example, in the femme-poisson's section: "personne ne m'entend car ma voix ne passe pas mes lèvres qu'une brise salée, un bruit d'écume qui meurt sur le sable en de très légers éclatements de bulles" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 33). There is an association between *écume* and death or the incapacity to move, and this association further links the text to the Turner paintings. Next to this passage is a detail from *The Slave Ship*, depicting sea foam and fish in the water, being circled by seagulls. In the middle of the detail selected by NDiaye is what appears to be a single leg (like a *queue*), a broken shackle attached to the foot, referencing escape from enslavement. This reinforces connections to both mermaids (fish women) and siren (bird women), as well as the association between these figures and death.

These fish and birds are at the forefront of the complete painting, with the ship in the back and more bodies and shackles to the left of this leg (see Appendix B, figure 16). The focus on the single leg draws a connection between the femme-poisson and the murdered enslaved passengers in the painting, and the leg directly in the middle of the fish, foam, and birds implies a fantasy in which this person has died in the water, amidst the foam, and was possibly reborn as a femme-poisson. This is reinforced by the first painting in the book, *Yachts* (a ship and the people aboard it) approaching land (Paris), implying that she has not vaguely washed ashore from the sea, but has come from a vessel. A panel of the *Slave Ship* reappears in section II, alongside the painter's remarks that he could eat the femme-poisson and no one would blame him because "Elle était à lui […]. elle avait plus de conscience qu'un poulpe. Lui en était

persuadé, mais elle était *sa chose* indéniablement." (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 71), language that turns her into an object he can own. This draws yet another connection between sea creatures and the femme-poisson, and also draws attention to the dehumanizing justification for slavery: he can own her and eat her because she is less human and has less consciousness, and though he is himself aware that it is not true, he is able to continue because "personne ne se souciait." He continues: "Si je te jette dans l'eau noire, murmura-t-il à son oreille, tu ne me reviendras pas. Tu t'enfuiras, tu n'es pas dressée à revenir" (73), further dehumanizing her by telling her that she does not have the agency or physical capacity to do as she wishes.

V. *L'Écume des* Mythological Shores: The Femme-Poisson's Mythical References

There are undeniable connections here to enslaved women taken as mistresses by enslavers, and as to the parallels to *The Little Mermaid*, we will see a reversal to this story. Where the little mermaid was so in love with the prince she was unable to kill him, the femme-poisson will ultimately (presumably, as the ending is ambiguous) kill the artist. Each painting becomes lighter at the end of the book and increasingly focused on the sky, with the final painting filled with sun (see Appendix B, figure 20), as if the femme-poisson has escaped the seafoam, as the little mermaid does when she dissolves into foam and ascends into the sky. Returning to the Nereids and *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus*, the sea foam nymph Galatea turns her lover into an immortal river spirit upon his being murdered by Polyphemus[29]. As with the fish and the unshackled leg, the fish in *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* appear to be swimming out of the Nereids, implying a connection and transformation between the natural and the spiritual figures

[29] Galatea is pined after by the cyclops Polyphemus, but she has fallen in love with a Sicillian man named Acis. In some legends, after Acis is killed by Polyphemus, Galatea eventually warms up to and falls in love with the cyclops. Interestingly, their son, Galas, is said to be the ancestor of the Gauls, who partly inhabited what is now France.

that occurs after death: the little mermaid who turns into an air spirit; Acis who turns into a river spirit; and the bodies in the water who potentially become fish (or femmes-poissons).

Parallel to each inclusion of *The Slave Ship* in Part I (which appears in *La Naufragée* three times in the femme-poisson's section, once in the artist's section, as well as on the cover) is a passage describing the inability to speak and the need for water. In Part II, the painting is focused on the hands reaching from the water, and the narration describes the smallness of the femme-poisson's body and the anxiety in her eyes. NDiaye writes, "il songea alors qu'elle lui appartenait et qu'elle ne pouvait avoir la moindre idée du sort qu'il lui réservait, et qu'elle pouvait redouter qu'il la tue (qu'il la découpe et fasse d'elle un plat curieux de poisson) aussi bien qu'espérer qu'il la laisse en vie. […] Elle était à lui et il pouvait la manger et s'en vanter et personne ne saurait comment l'en blâmer, car personne ne pourrait affirmer qu'elle avait plus de conscience qu'un poulpe" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 71). This language implies an ownership, and also that others would assume the femme-poisson is less intelligent simply based on their physical perception of her, and immediately brings to mind the language in which biological racism is rooted. This also underlines her *chair de poisson* and the comestible nature of her body and the way her split form invalidates her consciousness to the public. He could sell and eat her like a fish and no one would care because they would not perceive her as meaningfully sentient (this parallels the argument of the judge ruling over the case of the Zong, which argued that the enslaved captives could be thrown overboard because they were comparable to transported horses (Brace 5).

The term "la naufragée" is never used in the narrative itself, but the allusions to *The Little Mermaid* and the placements of *The Slave Ship* create a link between the enslaved individuals drowning in the painting and the femme-poisson who has found herself in Paris.

The artist describes the femme-poisson as appearing at times to be "momifiée," which might suggest an experience of death and bodily preservation. While the painting and the historical incident on which it is based do not involve France, it is the former French colony Saint-Domingue which confused the sailors, and the *Sirène* is an important figure in Haitian Vodou. The Haitian *Sirène* is a powerful goddess who gives fortune to those who do not trespass her and harms those who do. She is married to Agwa, the deity of the sea, and is known for her beautiful voice and features (Boyle and Estabrook). There is also a mermaid figure of African mythology which might have inspired the Haitian *Sirène*, often referred to as Mami Wata (though her name varies by region). Given the migration movement from Africa to the Caribbean, it is possible that Mami Wata — herself a combination of African water deities and European mermaids — is the inspiration for the Haitian *Sirène*, a water spirit and deity who is also physically half human and half fish or snake. Like Mami Wata, she is often portrayed with a snake, and also sometimes has a mirror, in which devotees can embody her powers and create the reality or future they seek to have.

The relationship between mermaids, Africans, and Europeans dates to the 15th century (Drewal 161), and while the origins of Mami Wata are not concretely known, it is believed that Mami Wata (Pidgin English for "Mother of Water," with Pidgin English being a language that originated during the Transatlantic Slave Trade) is a figure building on preexisting water spirit mythology and European lore, as well as interactions across the African continent with Europeans. This figure then travelled to the different regions and cultures affected by the Transatlantic Slave Trade and was transformed as it was incorporated into different regional mythologies and religions. NDiaye's artistic selection is rather impactful in this context and within this series designed to create "rencontrés": a dialogue between a British painter and a

French artist of Senegalese heritage about a nationless figure who might be inspired by a deity born from centuries of cross-cultural trade, communication, and enslavement. The femme-poisson's self-identification as femme-poisson seems to parallel Mami Wata: a name that is split in two and represents both the human and the water.

Mami Wata is a symbol of a "free" spirit detached from social or geographical constraint and is identified with Europeans as opposed to a specific African region or culture. To many African regions, Europeans were associated with the sea, owing to their wide-spanning travel and large ships, and Mami Wata (originally depicted as part human and part crocodile, snake, or fish) became a mermaid as the European imagery became more widespread.[30] The most common visual depiction of Mami Wata is of a mermaid emerging from the sea, combing her hair and gazing upon herself in a mirror, an item that (like the mermaid's body) represents the boundaries between water and land as the surface appears water-like. The mirror is also an important object for rituals devoted to Mami Wata, as "mirroring" Mami Wata and impersonating foreign ideals or cultural touchstones allow a closeness to Mami Wata (which further highlights Mami Wata's association with European culture). The mirror also symbolizes Mami Wata's beauty, and her ability to either lure away those who cross her path, after which she will either destroy them or bestow great wealth. This interpretation of Mami Wata brings to mind the hybrid nature of the femme-poisson, and Mami Wata's ambiguous history (Henry Drewal describes this history as remaining "conjectural," owing to the variety of cultures and nations that combined over time to create this myth) likewise parallels that of the femme-

[30] Henry John Drewal suggests that Mami Wata served as a basis to "understand and translate European mermaid myths and images into African ones from the first momentous Euro-African contacts in the fifteenth century" (Drewal, *African Arts*, 66).

poisson, who is unaware of how she came to be. The mirror also brings to mind the painter's efforts to capture the femme-poisson, seeking to capture her spirit visually and be rewarded.

Before purchasing the femme-poisson, the artist in *La Naufragée* describes the femme-poisson as a Medusa, with "cheveux flottant, soulevés par l'eau sale: une masse molle et floue" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 61), an image that brings to mind certain descriptions and depictions of Mami Wata (see index). The references to serpentine form and comparisons between the femme-poisson and the Leviathan draw similarities between Mami Wata and the femme-poisson. In addition to being mermaid- and siren-adjacent, the femme-poisson is compared to a Leviathan. The humans scream "On verra le gout que ça, chair ou poisson! Saloperie de Léviathan!" (19). This adds a potential religious quality as the Leviathan might refer not just to a monster but specifically to a personification of the Devil. We might also think of the following question from Job 41:1: "Can you pull in Leviathan with a fish hook? Can you pull in Leviathan with a hook or tie down his tongue with a rope?", implying it is not possible to take in a Leviathan with a mere fishing tool, nor is it possible to tamper its voice with human means (can the painter stop or capture the mythical femme-poisson's song with a mortal paintbrush?).

Even when she is dehydrated and in misery, the femme-poisson's song is explosive. There is a slight reversal here, as the femme-poisson is herself threatened with being eaten, whereas the Leviathan threatens to eat the damned. Both the Leviathan and mermaids or sirens can be ambiguous in art, literature, and historical "sightings," which makes sense in the context of the femme-poisson, as the humans do not attempt to actually "see" her, and reject her fish-form at first sight. A leviathan can refer generally to a sea monster or even a large whale, and mermaids are likewise sometimes referenced when a sailor has actually spotted a manatee or narwhal. European colonizers frequently described sirens and mermaids they claimed to have

seen in the Caribbean (Christopher Columbus famously mistook manatees for mermaids while sailing near the island of Hispanola, now the Dominican Republic), writing that they were not as beautiful as they are portrayed in paintings and in fact resembled men.

The artist will also ask if she is a "femme-serpent" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 65), and this comparison to the Leviathan creates an ambiguity of her identity and appearance: she is a woman with a tail and refers to herself as being part fish, but she is described by the people around her both as a serpent and a siren. The femme-poisson narrates: "Le reflet scintillant d'une lame courte et large s'élève dans la clarté, l'air palpable. Figée d'épouvante je regarde le soleil: ennemi, desséchant, mais pâle et lointain" (19). As on the previous page, the narration draws connection between whiteness ("un halo de blancheur," "pale et lointain") and the natural scenes depicted by JMW Turner's paintings. It is interesting to consider the reaction of sailors to manatees or other large sea creatures as being horrific and disconcerting versions of the beautiful mermaids they have seen in art, because the femme-poisson *is* physically a mermaid, and her human half *is* feminine, and yet she is still repulsive to the people around her and the painter is unable to capture the beauty of her voice in his paintings, the form which suggested to sailors such as Columbus that mermaids are beautiful and alluring women.

I would also like to propose a supplementary reading of the femme-poisson as an example of eco-fiction. Eco-fiction is a term popularized in the 1960s, but a genre that uses themes and motifs that can be traced to antiquity. This gives us a framework for comparison between *La Naufragée* and NDiaye's other animal transformations, which are a common them in her work and which will be present in chapters 2 and 3. The 1971 anthology *Eco-fiction*, edited by John Stadler, begins: "The earth is an eco-system. It possesses a collective memory. Everything that happens, no matter how insignificant it may seem, affects in some way at some

time the existence of everything else within that system" (Stadler, preface). Human-animal transformation is a common motif in eco-fiction; the process of transformation is usually instantaneous in and is often a source of punishment, as animals are conceptualized as a degradation of or antithesis to the human spirit (Gymnich and Segão Costa 70). These metamorphoses underscore the notion that "everything is connected to everything else" (70). The femme-poisson physically marries the division between human and nature that we will see in *Ladivine* and *Trois femmes puissantes*, where women will transform into birds and dogs. The bird and dog transformations are fluid when the women are alive but become permanent when the women's human forms die.

The femme-poisson is, of course, *not* transforming, and though there is not a significant scholarship on mermaids as elements of eco-fiction, I propose mermaids are an exemplary representation of one of the major themes of eco-fiction: human history is inextricably tied to natural history. The treatment of the femme-poisson (and of mermaids more broadly in literary studies) demonstrates a privileging of the human over the natural. If Turner shows the indifference of nature to humanity in his sweeping waters and fiery skies, NDiaye's added words show humanity's indifference to life and the capacity (or perhaps even the inclination) of humanity to qualify what is sufficiently human-adjacent to warrant care. Eco-fiction can depict attempts to overcome that which is inherent to the world, which we can use as an allegory for the violence of overcoming, hiding, or changing one's intrinsic identity.

In Turner's paintings, the natural world is overwhelming to the human subjects, just as the humans are for the fish woman. The text displays *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons,* 1834, and focalizes on a bridge and displays a group of people. The accompanying text describes "un halo de blancheur miroitante qui n'est pas la réalité des humains, je le sens bien,

qui n'es pas ce que leur montrent leurs yeux mais simplement la façon dont leur monde se découvre à mon regard inadapté. Et, quant à eux, voient-ils ainsi dans l'eau?" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 15). The femme-poisson refers to herself as being "inadapté" to the human world she must now inhabit, and the humans are likewise ill-suited to her world, as they cannot perceive it. The two different worlds (above sea and below, the fish woman's world and the human world) are mutually incomprehensible.

NDiaye describes an "il" walking through a crowd during "le soleil matinal" when he encounters the tender flesh of a woman: before even seeing the femme-poisson, he has "la sensation d'une nudité toute proche et incongrue qui le remua dans l'instant, comme il s'était cogné à elle" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 47). The painter (the anonymous "il") feels the femme-poisson's body before he truly sees her ("avant même qu'il ait eu le temps de chercher des yeux le visage au-dessus de cette chair frôlée"). He notes her blue eyes, green teeth, white hair that appears blonde, and blue lips, "pas un soupçon de sang dans ces lèvres-là" (49). The passage is accompanied by *Vallée d'Aoste (Tempête de neige, avalanche et orage)*, focused on what appears to be two women who have been shipwrecked.

The painter is most troubled by her foreignness: "ce qui le troubla le plus fut que ce visage de misère ne ressemblait en rien à celui des pauvresses qu'on voyait nombreuses dans le quartier" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 49). She entrances and repulses him, and as he watches on, this is when the femme-poisson begins her song and the artist notices her mermaid tail. The suffering portrayed in the face of the femme-poisson turns into an ecstasy and he notes that her face is empty of intelligence and he finds her "laide et pitoyable," with a terrifying mouth (and voice). These remarks happen internally, and he interacts neither with the femme-poisson nor

the other market-goers or venders, who start screaming "Emportez le monster! Qu'on enferme la sirène!" (57).

We might also understand the femme-poisson as the writer who is unable to break free from the constraint of being misunderstood. At the end of the story, the painter has died and the femme-poisson has escaped without trace — the only evidence of her existence or entrapment in his home is the immortalization of her voice in his paintings; her voice (her grief, her inheritance) taken from her and transformed by the (western, male) artistic gaze. The painter has also transformed the immaterial expression of this trauma into a physical (colored) object. It is interesting to note, too, that NDiaye herself has been compared to a "sirène": in a 2001 article in *Le Monde*, Pierre Lepape wrote "On a moins l'impression de lire Marie NDiaye que de se laisser séduire par une sirène qui ne craint pas d'abuser les charmes de sa voix" (Lepape).

It is important to consider the use of "part" and "half" here in relation to NDiaye's descriptions of herself as "100% French," as if there is no identity in which cultures or nationalities come together to form a new identity, likely in rejection of the classification as being a francophone author, which occurred especially frequently at the beginning of her career, and supposes there is no middle ground between francophone and French, placing a significant amount of importance in belonging to a singular and easily-defined nationality. Is it possible to divide the physical (stigmatized) being from the "self"? What must the femme-poisson do to be accepted into the Parisian landscape she has entered; how great must her "part d'humanité" be to be viewed as human by the passersby around her?

The choice of "part" (as compared to the previous "moitié d'humanité") is interesting as we can question whether she is referring to a physical humanity (the part of her body that is human) or a figurative humanity (her thoughts, feelings, and experiences). The tension here is

an unattainable sameness, demonstrating how society and language establish the other by honing in on certain variations of the self, and the near-impossibility of escaping the socially constructed identity when the dominant institution refuses to acknowledge the harm it has caused. It brings into question the true meaning and implication of universalism, and whether sameness is routed in a shared culture, physical form, or history. The femme-poisson, who affirms her difference when she calls herself femme-poisson rather than hide her *queue*, seems to respond that it is actually physically (her dehydration) and emotionally harmful to attempt to eradicate perception of difference.

We can connect this both to the slave trade and the exploitation of these lives, and more loosely, the way Marie NDiaye has been received culturally and critically (though this book was published long before her Goncourt success), with incessant attention paid to her African heritage, of which she has no control and minimal knowledge but which does manifest in much of her work. Value is assigned to neutral aspects of the body or of shared culture, despite the individual's own perception or understanding of said aspects. This is a fraught and problematic topic, as it might encourage ignoring of difference (asserting Frenchness in the face of being mis-labelled an African author, at the potential risk of ignoring that NDiaye is Black and does have African ancestry, i.e., rejecting part of the self in an attempt to reject false or inaccurate characterizations).

VI. "La Sirène Chante!": Voice, Singing, and Memory

On the second page of *La Naufragée*, the femme-poisson states "un instant d'oubli, et mes yeux s'ouvrent malgré moi" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 9). When the artist's friends visit his home and find so many new pieces as well as the water tank in which the femme-poisson was stored, they are curious but don't dwell, the last lines reading: "Quand il mourut peu après,

chez lui, ses amis découvrirent la pièce d'eau et le baquet vide. Ils s'interrogèrent brièvement sur l'usage de cet endroit, puis oublièrent, car c'était sans importance" (81). There is also the symbolism of trading books for her body: the artist must sacrifice knowledge, consciousness, and self-awareness of the wrongness of his actions in order to own the femme-poisson, though this is not perfectly managed, with the artist occasionally and suddenly noticing the pain in her expressions. He has traded knowledge and stories so as to steal hers. The femme-poisson is unable to ignore or forget her distress, her heritage, and her history.

By contrast, the artist's friends are able to find the decontextualized remnants of the femme-poisson's capture and suffering and ignore it, appreciate the art borne from it, and immediately forget the evidence. The artistic works have intrinsic aesthetic value but, without context (sight of the femme-poisson, descriptions of the work, explicitly descriptive titles), do not represent the femme-poisson's song, just as the political purpose and success of *The Slave Ship* has been contested. The artist is unsuccessful in distilling the femme-poisson's voice asking for just one more month, and then another, until she presumably kills him and escapes because he is divorcing it from her body, her medium, and the history from which it originates. In contrast, though *La Naufragée* does not explicitly name the history it alludes to, it is nevertheless successfully contextualized by its settings and by the use of Turner's *The Slave Ship*, which suggests reference to the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The narrative speaks *as* the fish-woman, thus giving her autonomy, which disappears when she is captured by the painter, who seeks to distill her song into his work. This creates a rather complicated interpretation of artistic voice and subject: NDiaye, also an artist, is the creator of the fish-woman's voice; the painter is her captor. This relationship between author and represented subject or real-world person, calls back to the dichotomy between NDiaye and

Marie Sachs in *Un pas de chat sauvage*, and ultimately underlines questions about autobiographical and/or biographical elements in fiction, a thread we will continue to follow in *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) and *Ladivine* (2013). In *Un pas de chat sauvage*, Marie NDiaye speaks fictionally for Marie Sachs, in that she is the writer, but does not occupy the voice of Marie Sachs. In *La Naufragée*, NDiaye occupies the voice of the fish woman (and, in the fish woman's song, the voice of her ancestors). We can also interrogate how JMW Turner fits into this web of voices, autonomy, and speaking, as he was himself inspired by an historical account of a true event (*The History and Abolition of the Slave Trade* by Thomas Clarkson) and was motivated by the momentum of abolitionist movements of the time. His painting was, in fact, accompanied by an excerpt from a larger poem titled *Fallacies of Hope*, written by Turner himself:

> Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
> Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
> Declare the Typhon's coming.
> Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard
> The dead and dying ne'er heed their chains
> Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
> Where is thy market now?

Turner's use of text alongside image somewhat mirrors NDiaye's choices in genre and narration: Turner did not describe the painting or explain the historical and political history behind it; rather, he accompanied it with a subjectively interpretive piece of writing, as NDiaye has done (contrasting the other books in this collection). It is further interesting that NDiaye "zooms" in on certain elements of *The Slave Ship* as well as other paintings in the book, the history of the femme-poisson serves as a voice for a certain cultural and historical experience. This again highlights the tension between the universal and the particular.

NDiaye underlines the individuality contained within a history of a collective, and even within an artistic "canon." Flohic's method of combining artists likewise speaks to the vastness

of artistic perspective and historical (or geographical) experience, and NDiaye's decision to use fiction, as opposed to an art book or biography. This poem places the focus on the storm in the painting and the market (be it the free market, the slave market, or otherwise), decentralizing the murders on the ship Zong, and further situates the implications of these deaths within the context of the market. The poem, like the painting, risks reducing the murdered Africans to bodies in the water and the last lines place the consequence not on the importance of lost life but on lost human capital. However, it is quite ambiguous: is the fallacious hope Turner's own hope that society will improve upon the abolition of slavery? Is the hope that of the sailors bringing the Africans to market? Is it the hope of the Africans who survive the journey? Is the market meant to mean the free market more broadly? Where does one purchase hope? Potentially, on auction in NYC.

The Slave Ship made its first American appearance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1872 after having been purchased from Ruskin by the president of the Met. It was not initially well-received, though it was a popular exhibition due to the shocking cost of its purchase (2.6 million dollars in 21st century currency) (Scott). Alice Hopper, a wealthy resident of Boston, purchased the painting for display at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. It was displayed alongside Ruskin's praising description of the painting, and critical and popular opinion changed as a local newspaper alluded to its abolitionist associations, calling it "the embodiment of a giant protest" (Walker). Perception of the painting as well as desire to view it were thus influenced not merely by its subject and style but also by its price and controversial reception in the art world. This high bidding on a painting of murdered Africans is strangely relevant to *La Naufragée*, in which we find an allegory for slave markets.

In part two, the femme-poisson disguises herself as a human woman to avoid further attacks from strangers and seeks help at the market, but is still unable to communicate with the people around her. She collapses and remembers a voyage across the ocean, and, in an almost out of body experience where she does not know she is capable of such voice or even what she is saying, she begins singing. The marketgoers are entranced by her song, which actually belongs to and descends from a group of people or a collective history/culture ("notre" voix, but when she stops singing they begin attacking her again. One person screams "Ramenez-la d'où elle vient! Qu'on ne la voie plus jamais par ici" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 57), a statement that parallels broader contemporary responses to migration in NDiaye's other work, such as Rudy telling Fanta to go back to where she came from in Senegal. Using this sentence in connection to the femme-poisson, who is referred to as a monster in the next sentence ("Emportez le monstre! Qu'on enferme le sirène"). The book ends in the third-person, using the narrative perspective of the painter who kidnaps the sirène and brings her to England. Over the course of the story, her voice is stolen and manipulated until it ultimately disappears: he says to her, "Tu m'aideras à travailler, hein? Ta voix, toute ta voix, je la mettrai dans ma peinture" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 69). The use of images that do not literally correspond to the narrative demonstrate the difficulty and theoretical impossibility of putting her voice (and not just her voice, but a different artistic medium her song) into his painting, and the difficulty of NDiaye's project on the whole.

When the painter (described with an ambiguous "il") hears her song, he recognizes it as a siren song, noticing that she is not human, and in fact covers his ears for protection. This awareness of her power turns his fear into jealousy as he craves possessing the very power her voice has over him, and wishes to instill it in his own art. He thinks, "Maintenant, la sirène, il

faut l'enfermer soigneusement ou lui régler son compte" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 59). The artist buys her after trading his books and negotiating with the director of the Jardin des plantes, and he takes her to London via boat: "Elle voyageait dans une malle, comme un animal de compagnie, et c'est ainsi qu'il la voyait encore, comme une bête très légèrement humaine" (61). The femme-poisson's song is described in the first-person narration as the incarnation of her psychological pain after leaving her home. The third-person narration that does not speak for the femme-poisson, the existence of the paintings throughout the entire narrative, and the absence of the femme-poisson at the end of the story following her escape can be read as a commentary on historical action and the transmission of such stories: when the femme-poisson disappears and the painter dies, the paintings survive; while so many lives and names and voices were lost in the Zong ship massacre, the artistic representations have survived (and persisted).

When the femme-poisson sings, she is finally able to verbalize, and she continues to sing, surprised by the power and beauty of her own voice, and we see an allusion to sirens: she was unaware of the power of her voice, stating "j'ai mené une existence de femme-poisson pragmatique, tout entièrement tournée vers les questions de notre agréable et confortable vie quotidienne: que les humains se laissent attirer par notre voix au-delà de toute raison" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 33). This brings to mind Turner's painting of the Zong massacre, and the moral complexities therein. The painting is first and foremost complicated given Turner, like his fictional counterpart, is capturing and depicting the story of individuals who cannot speak for themselves (the femme-poisson cannot speak). Turner is leaning into an historical context which is actually not immediately clear in the work itself. The painting shows bodies in the water, but they are not immediately clear, as Turner has depicted just arms reaching out of the water amongst birds and fish.

Additionally, it is not obvious that this is a result of man-made violence; the waves are tumultuous, the sky is vibrantly red, and there appears to be a storm swallowing the ship that is extremely small relative to the nature surrounding it. This mirrors the ambiguity of NDiaye's title: *la naufragée* does not indicate to the reader how she came to be shipwrecked. As *The Slave Ship* has a certain ambivalence that allows it a more transmittable quality (in that it is inspired by a specific incident but may represent the violence of many), "la naufragée" may speak for the femme-poisson in the story or it may be a representation of an anonymous shipwrecked woman, just as JMW Turner's painting was inspired by a specific massacre but meant to more generally depict the horrors of slavery. The term "la naufragée" also removes the femme-poisson from historical or cultural context. She is not a Haitian *sirène*, Mami Wata, or a mermaid — she is absent of history and culture and she is lost.

There is also the fact that Turner, a popular artist during his own time, has used this event in the creation of a work that will inevitably have financial value; though Turner painted it with a specific political awareness (if not goal), it was first purchased by his friend John Ruskin, a writer and critic who described it as the "noblest sea that Turner ever painted" (Ruskin 382). Ruskin later wrote about the painting that "She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard" (Ruskin 382).[31] This assigns agency to the ship rather than the traders who murdered the enslaved individuals, and as Ruskin was contemporary to this abolitionist movement and

[31] Ruskin elaborated: "if I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this. Its daring conception — ideal in the highest sense of the word — is based on the *purest truth*, and wrought out with the concentrated knowledge of a life; its color is absolutely perfect, not one false or morbid hue in any part or line, and so modulated that every square inch of canvas is a perfect composition; its drawing as accurate as fearless; […] the whole picture dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions — (completing thus the perfect system of all truth, which we have shown to be formed by Turner's works) — the power, majesty, and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable Sea" (Ruskin 383). Ruskin links "purest truth" and the sea, ignoring all historical framework (and debates over a the truth of events). The deathly power is ascribed to the sea, not the humans who murdered.

Turner, he is seeing the painting and interpreting it differently in the very moment that Turner saw its message as being important. For Ruskin to derive such aesthetic pleasure from the piece nevertheless requires an active support or ignoring of its subject matter (as Fulford puts it, "Ruskin, the aesthete, can only find Turner's painting sublime if he creates a cleavage between aesthetics and ethics by ensuring a critical distance from the slaves thrown overboard," because to not take such a distance would make the painting too painful [Fulford 11]).[32] NDiaye avoids the potential aestheticization of murder and slavery by using allegory, emphasizing the unrepresentability of these events, and suggesting an appropriative cruelty of depiction as well as the incapacity to represent a lost history without fictionalizing. NDiaye's painting/text duality additionally acknowledges a limit of postcolonial studies, which risks interpreting colonial histories in the language and systems of the oppressor.

VII. Conclusion

Marie-Hélène Routisseau describes NDiaye's fantastical style as fables or paraboles because the singularity lies in the use of fantastic elements to "témoigner d'une représentation de la vie psychique conçue comme le lieu d'un refoulement" ("Vers une relecture critique du mythe de Méduse," Routisseau 1). She further notes that the story is a double work in which the "reappropriation" of the myth is consubstantial with the interpretation of the myth, as the reader works to understand the story itself and its historical and fantastical origins (in the case of *La Naufragée*, the myth of the sirène and the history of slavery) alongside the literal story occurring (the fish-woman and the painter). The paintings ensure that the story is not interpreted independent of its context and historical implications as they are a reminder that

[32] However, Ruskin's capacity to ignore the subject matter because of the aesthetic value he found in the painting is contestable: Ruskin sold the painting at the end of his life because it brought him too much sadness (Brace 15).

the narrative is not just about a mermaid, but is symbolic of a greater story and history and is also influenced by mythical interpretations of the siren's voice, an inescapable and divine force. The fish-woman differs from a mythical siren in that she is not trying to lure the painter into his death; she is herself a victim of her difference and power, as her voice exposes her and enchants the painter.

It is impossible to not think of NDiaye's biracial identity (and even the duality in her name) when considering these questions, the way it is treated in interviews with French media, and the way NDiaye responds by affirming her cultural purity, having grown up in France. The femme-poisson is unable to talk with the humans around her, but shocks passerby with the power and beauty of her song, speaking to being as fearful of the slightly unfamiliar (part-human) (Bettez). The femme-poisson demonstrates the impossibility of a universalist culture in which the body signifies (even when interpreted incorrectly) identity and of the impossibility of neutral universalism in a society that has historical ties to the slave trade. The femme-poisson's experience in the Jardin des plantes (with its colonialist associations) and Les Halles (an allegory for marketplaces of enslaved Africans) cannot be separated from the history that inspired the text.

Sarah Fulford notes that "any notion of decolonized aesthetic is doomed since our very notion of what constitutes the sublime has been forged within a context whereby imperialism imaginatively obscures and distances otherness or alterity" (Fulford 2). Like Turner's other works, *The Slave Ship* communicates the smallness of humanity in the fact of the natural world. Critics contend that the magnitude of the storm symbolize the magnitude of the violence and danger of the slave trade, and the wrecking of ships was a popular metaphor for abolition during Turner's lifetime. If we decide that the work has cultural and historical merit separate from its

aesthetic value, and that it *also* has aesthetic value though it is problematic to appreciate the work as a seascape divorced from its subject matter, NDiaye's project becomes all the more intriguing in that it uses an historical context (the Jardin des plantes, the market, a presumed reference to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, etc.), and also removes Turner's paintings from their respective intentions and contexts and gives them a fantastical and fictional accompanying story.

This depiction of the artist is as much a commentary on the capacity of a creator to occupy another's voice as it is on the way in which a work is received and conceptualized by a general public, as well as the artist's process. Turner's paintings have intrinsic representational value when they are fiction and are the scenes we presume are being experienced by the femme-poisson; they become morally problematic when we learn how they were (in this story) created. NDiaye also does not occupy the voice of the artist who could be Turner, choosing instead to switch to third-person before telling the perspective of a character inspired by a real person. This switch defies a first-person narrative intimacy established in the first half of the book and symbolizes historical silencing in the face of abrupt harm. This is an expression of limits to empathy: even after spending significant time with her, the artist's perspective of her humanity is unchanged. The only escape for the femme-poisson is in killing the artist, liberating herself from him, his work, and from the reader. The femme-poisson's first-person narrative voice does not return at the end of the novel.

We can also find some fictional and contextual parallels to *Un pas de chat savauge* which help situate the ethics of *La Naufragée*. *Un pas de chat sauvage* also focuses on a certain creator-muse relationship, albeit with a less predatory motivation. Just as the artist in *La Naufragée* is unable to translate the oral song of the femme-poisson into the medium of painting, the narrator

in *Un pas de chat sauvage*, who describes Martinez as her "modèle," is unable to fully capture the experience of hearing Martinez in the medium of writing. Martinez also disappears at the end of the story, the only traces left being the photos taken of her by Nadar and some documents which mention her name, and the fictional Sachs disappears from *Un pas de chat sauvage*, the only proof of her existence being the narrator's memories and this book.

There is also the fact that both *La Naufragée* and *Un pas de chat sauvage* were written for museum projects (the Flohic series not being a museum exhibition but museum-adjacent all the same, with the editors curating an artistic space outside of museum walls, something *Un pas de chat sauvage* also attempts as a piece of fiction associated with but independent of a museum exhibition). These two works examine to what degree it is possible to know the artistic and historical subject and the limits of an artist's depiction. Even with the historical documents included about Maria Martinez in *Un pas de chat sauvage* and the biography about Turner at the end of *La Naufragée*, NDiaye chooses to fictionalize these two figures, giving the impression that like the mermaid dissolving into *écume* and like the seemingly transparent Nereids at the forefront of *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* — no matter the medium (painting, writing, biographical curation), artistic depiction is limited to traces of a life.

It also is interesting to consider that both *Un pas de chat sauvage* and *La Naufragée* depict music and artists, strengthening the idea that while it is possible to depict a version of another life or historical event, such work requires fiction. It also requires revision: some of the paintings selected by NDiaye are versions of a work Turner himself replicated throughout his career, painting multiple versions of the same subject. Turner expanded upon his own vision of historical events (see Appendix B, figures 18-19 and 20-22) and this perhaps gives more license for NDiaye to do so as well. For example, he painted two different perspectives of *The Burning*

of the Houses of Lords and Commons, showing the event from opposite sides of the bridge. He painted at least three versions of *Norham Castle*, and NDiaye selected "Sunrise" (the third version) as the version included in *La Naufragée (*figure 10), the final painting in the book.

Narrative perspective and ethical permission become further complicated in NDiaye's Goncourt prize winning *Trois femmes puissantes*, which is written in a third-person narration from the inner perspective of its main characters. *Trois femmes puissantes* also fictionalizes a political moment, addressing contemporary migrative movement in between Africa and Europe. NDiaye also generalizes a certain political moment, but does so through individualized narrations depicting the lives of three specific women and the people adjacent to them, which we can contrast to the anonymized and silent bodies of *The Slave Ship*. The question is thus not only who has the right so speak for whom, but for whom is the artist speaking and with what aim.

III. CHAPTER 2
MORE FRENCH THAN OTHERS:[33]
INTERSECTIONS OF CLASS, RACE, AND GENDER IN *TROIS FEMMES PUISSANTES*

While researching the life of Maria Sachs, the fictional narrator in *Un pas de chat sauvage* writes that she has

> des scrupules, des effrois mystiques ainsi que des réticences féminines (broyer la vie d'une autre femme pour extraire quelle vérité sur celle de mes contemporaines?) […] quelle voix devait s'exprimer, celle de Maria Martinez qui, même en rêve, jamais ne me visitait, ou la mienne dont j'avais la plus grande honte souvent, ou une autre encore qui pourrait unir à la sienne pure, remarquable et hospitalière nos deux consciences vulnérables? (NDiaye, *Un pas de chat sauvage* 13)

In *Trois femmes puissantes*, a collection of three stories depicting the contemporary immigration crisis, we encounter the questions posed by the narrator of *Un pas de chat sauvage*. Whose voices and whose experiences are expressed in *Trois femmes puissantes* and how should we consider the author and reader's relation to them?

This chapter will use *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) as a means of examining NDiaye's engagement with contemporary political issues via depictions of the migrant experience in 21th century France, particularly as they pertain to class, race, and gender. We will begin with a summary of *Trois femmes puissantes* and a brief discussion of its reception and NDiaye's public relationship with the work following her 2009 Goncourt and the subsequent controversies: the political "devoir" assigned to NDiaye as a representative of French culture, and scholarly opinions on *Trois femmes puissantes*. We will then move into discussion of the book itself, which is divided into three linked but distinct stories about three women living in France or Senegal.

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[33] From "The 'Marie NDiaye Affair' or the Coming of a Postcolonial Evoluée" by Dominic Thomas: "President Sarkozy's electoral campaign mantra ('France, love her or leave her') and the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity's activities, under cover of which the real objectives of the national identity debate are to foster and reinforce social hierarchies, perceptions that some 'French' people are more French than others, or that others are 'communautaires' [factionalist]. These constructs have roots that can be traced back to the colonial era…" (Thomas 158).

In *Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye examines specific (though multifaceted) experiences of otherness, estrangement, and crises of identity: these experiences are often tied to race and familial/national identity, as well as class. As we saw in chapter 1, NDiaye's characters frequently experience uncanny and other-worldly events that are not explicitly defined as magic. The characters themselves are marked by hidden differences they might not understand or perceive, highlighting individuals who are at the periphery of a society to whom this exoticizing and othering is imperceptible. In each of these stories, the *trois femmes puissantes* struggle within separate but connected worlds, and the dissimilitudes between each story illustrates the systemic nature of patriarchy, racism, and nationalism and the ways these prejudices are overtly and subtly physically and psychologically violent. NDiaye also depicts generational neglect and inherited family anxiety, demonstrating that parents might replicate harm they have suffered, creating cycles that are difficult to break.

Marie NDiaye wrote *Trois femmes puissantes* to explore the refugee crisis in a fictional literary space. She was "intéressée et bouleversée par les histoires de réfugiés qui arrivent à Malte ou en Sicile ou ailleurs. [...] Je sais que de nombreux reportages existent, mais je voulais essayer de donner aussi une matière littéraire à ces tragédies. Car c'est une tragédie actuelle, mais tout imprégnée d'héroïsme: pour moi ces gens sont des héros dans la mesure où l'on n'a pas idée de la vaillance et du courage qu'il faut pour entreprendre ce genre de périple, passer de l'Afrique à l'Europe en clandestine" (Kaprèlian,). This quote suggests that fiction has a unique capacity to depict human resilience, courage, and individual heroism, and specifically resilience in the face of failing social, familial, and political systems. NDiaye continues: "lorsqu'on met en scène des personnages du pays où l'on vit, ce sont juste des êtres humains avec leurs ambiguïtés, leurs complexités. [...] C'est la même chose avec des personnages

d'ailleurs: ils ne sont pas des allégories. Ce que je raconte dans cette histoire n'est pas significatif de l'Afrique" (Kaprèlian). Much of the discourse about *Trois femmes puissantes* focuses on its African setting and the book was celebrated for depicting the horrors of certain refugee experiences ("Fame, Celebrity, and the Conditions of Visibility of the Postcolonial Writer," Moudileno 72).

The stranger elements of *Trois femmes puissantes* (for example, the animals, the vague endings, and the narrative ambiguity) are quite typical of NDiaye's style, though the novel differs from much of NDiaye's other works in treating social issues such as race and gender in a more overt fashion, particularly in the third story. *Trois femmes puissantes* is also a bit clearer than other novels (for example, the transformations into animals occurs at the very end of each story and only briefly, unlike the femme-poisson or the dogs we will find in *Ladivine*), meaning it is a more accessible entry point into NDiaye's ongoing discussion of identity, estrangement, and neglect.

I. Summary and Introduction of the Novel

Trois femmes puissantes is a collection of three stories about the titular "trois femmes puissantes," Norah, Fanta, and Khady. Their "puissance féminine" will become less convincing as their stories progress and their self-agency diminishes. Each story is told in a third-person narration. Norah and Khady are the focus of their respective stories, and Rudy, husband of Fanta, is the narrative focus of the second story. The stories are loosely linked: Norah's father and Rudy's father gained their wealth at different periods in time via the same vacation resort in Dara Salam, where Rudy's white French family used to live. Khady worked as Norah's father's servant and is Fanta's cousin. Khady's in-laws believe Fanta has found great success in France and will be able to take in Khady, who will send them money. The women's trials originate

partly in parental strife: Norah's absent (and possibly murderous) father, Rudy's murderous (deceased) father and racist mother, and Khady's lack of parents, deceased grandmother, and unwelcoming in-laws. *Trois femmes puissantes* builds upon NDiaye's prior interrogations of individual and familial identity, animal metamorphosis, and travel or displacement between different countries. The stories are loosely tied, demonstrating the interconnected nature of trauma, even when it occurs at a distance. In Khady's narrative, for example, we find mention of Fanta: "À peine avait-elle entendu le nom de Fanta, une cousine qui avait épousé un Blanc et qui vivait maintenant en France" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 257).

In the first story, Norah, a lawyer living in Paris, travels to Senegal at the request of her father, who moved to Senegal with Norah's brother when she was a child, leaving Norah to be raised by her mother in France. Upon arriving in Dakar, Norah discovers that her brother is imprisoned for the murder of his stepmother and Norah's father seeks her legal counsel. Norah's brother, Sony, tells Norah that it was actually their father who committed the murder. We are told that she will help Sony because "c'était ainsi." Norah has the social and intellectual capital to help her brother but not the individual power to decide her own journey as she is beholden to her family.

In the second story, Fanta moves from Senegal to France with her husband, Rudy, who is white. Rudy's perspective is the focal point of the narrative voice. Rudy's remarks toward Fanta (telling her to go back where she came from) impact their relationship, as does Rudy's fear that Fanta is having an affair. Rudy and Fanta were both teachers in Senegal until Rudy was forced to leave his job. Rudy attacked a student who called him the son of a murderer, seeming to know Rudy's secret: that his father murdered a business partner when Rudy was a child. Fanta's teaching certifications aren't recognized in France and Rudy leaves the profession

to sell kitchen hardware. Over the course of the story, Rudy becomes increasingly anxious and jealous of Fanta's relationship with their son. He brings his son to his mother's house, where she is making a snack for a neighborhood child who is white. Rudy must consider the possibility that he inherited the racism of his mother and the violence of his father.

In the final story, Khady Demba is widowed without having conceived a child, and must immigrate to France after her deceased husband's family rejects her. Khady has no family of her own. She was raised by her late grandmother, who instilled in Khady a great kindness and capacity for self-love despite the troubling world around her. She faces enormous hardship on the journey to France, including prostitution, sexual assault, sexually transmitted disease, and subsequent pain and ill health. Her travelling companion, Lamine, takes her money and leaves her behind. Khady dies and the narrative ends with Lamine's perspective after he has found work in Paris.

II. A Controversial Prix Goncourt

The conversation about NDiaye's nationality and identity reached a new peak immediately following *Trois femmes puissantes* in 2009, when she was awarded the Prix Goncourt. NDiaye moved from France to Berlin following the election of Nicolas Sarkozy, characterizing France as a "monstrueuse" police state with heavy surveillance (Kaprèlian). Following NDiaye's Prix Goncourt in November of the same year, Éric Raoult, mayor of Raincy and deputy of Seine-Saint-Denis, responded to Marie NDiaye's comments by writing Frédéric Mitterrand, minister of Culture and Communication, that this most prestigious prize conferred a duty on its winners to "respecter la cohésion nationale et l'image de notre pays" because of its international visibility (Polloni and Siankowski). Mitterrand responded by underlining that the Prix Goncourt is an independent entity and affirming Marie NDiaye's talent and right to free speech. This was the

same year that Eric Besson, minister of education, initiated "le débat sur l'identité national," which included a debate and conference about the meaning of Frenchness.

The critical reception of *Trois femmes puissantes* is inseparable from contemporary debates on national identity. About the decision, jury member Jorge Semprun stated "il s'agit d'un choix politiquement correct. L'Académie aurait pu récompenser des livres plus audacieux à tout point de vue." Fellow jury member Françoise Chandernagor stated "ce choix [est] très littéraire. Marie NDiaye a une forme d'écriture qui n'appartient qu'à elle." Author and committee member Tahar Ben-Jelloun noted that NDiaye's win was "une excellente réponse à Eric Besson, qui nous bassine avec l'identité nationale. Marie NDiaye est le parfait exemple d'un métissage réussi, avec un père sénégalais et une mère beauceronne, cela donne d'excellents écrivains." Edmonde Charles-Roux, president of the Académie Goncourt, stated "C'est bien que le prix Goncourt soit décerné à une femme. Les hommes ont tellement l'habitude de les recevoir. Ils sont blasés. Cela va créer une atmosphère différente" (Beuve-Méry). Suggesting that the choice is "politically correct" and noting that it is good to give a woman the award because she is a woman detracts from the literary merit of the work and reinforces the very identity politics NDiaye personally rejects, and assigns a political quality to the choice of NDiaye that predates NDiaye's conflicts with Éric Raoult.

Reviews of *Trois femmes puissantes* were generally positive: Raphaëlle Rérolle wrote in *Le Monde*, "Mais ce qui rassemble vraiment ces textes, ce qui leur donne force et cohérence, c'est évidemment l'écriture de Marie NDiaye. À la fois introspective et précise (l'utilisation des adjectifs et des adverbes est étonnante de justesse), tour à tour éruptive et contenue, cette langue ouvre sur le monde mystérieux des pensées les plus secrètes" (Rérolle). In *The New York Times* review of the English translation, Fernanda Eberstadt described NDiaye's writing as

"hypnotic," "a storyteller with an unflinching understanding of the rock-bottom reality of most people's lives. This clear-sightedness combined with her subtle narrative sleights of hand and her willingness to broach essential subjects like the fate of would-be migrants to the rich North gives her fiction a rare integrity that shines through the sinuous prose. […] *Three Strong Women* is the poised creation of a novelist unafraid to explore the extremes of human suffering" (Eberstadt). In *Le Figaro*, Patrick Grainville praised *Trois femmes puissantes* as NDiaye's strongest work, "sur tous les tons, légendaires et réalistes, épiques, sociologiques, pathétiques, satiriques. Entre l'Afrique et la France, ses héroïnes ensorcelées, damnées par leur histoire, desserrent les mailles du piège, rayonnent d'une liberté souple et conquise, femmes puissantes jusque dans l'envol de la mort" (Graineville).

Grainville's review illustrates the limits of political reception: his *Figaro* review begins "NDiaye exorcise toutes les facettes de la honte, de l'humiliation, de la haine la plus âcre, de la colère et du ressentiment poisseux. Chacune de ses trois héroïnes connaît la chute, un péché originel inscrit, induré dans son histoire et dont il semble impossible de se débarrasser, tant le mal suinte et corrompt, empeste l'âme" (Grainville). The review describes Khady Demba as a "nouvelle Cendrillon […] un cristal incorruptible dans l'écrin de toutes les hontes humaines" with "une puissance radicale, d'une royauté animale et lucide malgré son ignorance de tout" (Grainville). Grainville's reading reduces the political power so frequently referenced in relation to *Trois femmes puissantes* to a common original evil from which there is no escape. Reference to an original sin erases the violence suffered in *Trois femmes puissantes*, and also suggests an inevitably to the racist aggressions, childhood trauma, poverty, sexual assault, murder, etc., suggesting it is traceable to a "péché originel."

In the realm of literary scholarship, the reception of *Trois femmes puissantes* has been mixed, with many making note of its more interesting ndiayïenne elements (such as the transformation of characters into birds, as she often uses animal transformation), while also describing it as inferior to many of NDiaye's prior works. Shirley Jordan notes the ways in which this novel and its Prix Goncourt play into the "alterity industry," describing a neoliberal fantasy in which the marginalized woman wins against the odds (Jordan 102-104). Diana Holmes describes *Trois femmes puissantes* as being ultimately successful, particularly in its capacity to elicit empathy in the reader, but discusses that some find the work "facile and sentimental" (Holmes 220). In *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition*, Andrew Asibong describes the *puissance* as "blandly and skimpily drawn" (Asibong 102). He notes that it is NDiaye's most commercially successful work, likely because of its clearer subject matter and the Goncourt, but suggests that "The book taken as a whole is, however, relatively unconvincing, at least when considered in the context of NDiaye's breathtaking, if less commercially successful, earlier and subsequent work" (Asibong 100).

The question of the "alterity industry" has been raised most insistently with regards to the third story about Khady Dhemba. In *Middlebrow Matters*, Diana Holmes asks:

> Is it ethically or politically acceptable to imagine her [Khady Demba] inner life in a way that grants Western readers the pleasure of empathy is this a form of neocolonial appropriation of her experience? And is it patronising and clichéd (the 'femme africaine, misérable et sublime') to attribute to Khady an invincible conviction of her own selfhood that survives trauma and even, symbolically, death? Do I have the right to be 'uplifted' by the imagined valour and resilience of a victim of the global inequality of which I myself am a beneficiary? (Holmes 216)

Diana Holmes suggests that the third-person narration helps avoid this potential appropriation of trauma by allowing the reader to understand Khady without occupying a first-person voice. The magical imagery established by the transformations into birds in the prior two chapters

creates a further separation between the reader and the protagonist, as Khady inhabits a world that is different from but reflective of the reader's own.

III. Otherness, Systemic Violence, and Engendering Empathy

Like NDiaye's other work, which depicts suffering in the context of intimate and often mundane family experiences, *Trois femmes puissantes* demonstrates the way systemic harm (such as closed borders, poor job opportunities, or lack of economic support for single women and mothers) manifest on an interpersonal level, and the impossibility of overcoming these problems through individual resilience. When the social hindrance is one's identity and the politics that stigmatize it, the solution is the erasure or suppression of that identity.

In "Thinking Beyond the Boundaries: Empire, Feminism, and the Domains of History," Antoinette Burton suggests that the nation, the empire, and history are themselves subject to feminist analysis, meaning feminism can serve in determining what counts as history, and that without these critical analyses feminism risks "reflecting back to the discipline what it has traditionally seen, i.e. gendered, raced and sexualized bodies serving as alibis in the 'fraternal struggles of history,' rather than acting as agents in the struggle *for* History, its cultural meanings, its political economies, and its social formations" (Burton 71). In illustrating the fraught relationship between France and its former colonies via the inclusion of multiple perspectives, geographies, and stories (including that of a French man), *Trois femmes puissantes* fulfills this needed analysis by showing how the "gendered, raced and sexualized bodies" of the *trois femmes puissantes* are both subject to empire and agents within a political economy. This is at odds with NDiaye's claim that she does not partake in politics of identity, and helps to explain NDiaye's reluctant engagement with these topics.

Do Norah, Fanta, and Khady suffer because they are immigrants, because they are estranged from family, because they are women, because they are unmarried or widowed, because of interracial relationships, because they have children, because they cannot have children, because they are daughters of men who wanted sons (and the list can go on)? NDiaye shows that identity and social harm are so interwoven that it would be reductive and harmful to attribute the violence suffered by the women singularly to race or gender. NDiaye further shows that the people who inflict harm upon them are just as varied as the women themselves, meaning the reader cannot dismiss this suffering and infliction of harm as something other people do to other people. NDiaye asserts that she is a French author and her work is French, meaning the migrant experience, as well as the experience of harming individuals who immigrate, is a French one.

In *Mythologies postcoloniales: Pour une décolonisation du quotidien*, Etienne Achille and Lydie Moudileno write that society has applied the term "racisme au quotidien" to moments where something occurs referencing race, but where direct pertinence to race is debatable, because of the "anodyne" nature of everyday interactions: "On le dit 'ordinaire' (par opposition à quoi? À un racisme extra-ordinare?) Pour les personnes non-blanches et autres minorités de France, le quotidien ne peut pas être banal. […] Le racisme au quotidien frappe parce que le langage n'est pas décolonisé, parce que les imaginaires demeurent racialisés, et parce que les corps sont pré-jugés en fonction de toute une histoire de racialisation de l'autre non-blanc" (Achille and Moudileno 11-12). This is exactly the case for Fanta and Rudy and Rudy's microaggressions are accompanied by exclusion from the nation. When Fanta moves to France with Rudy, she loses her family, culture, and general sense of belonging, and also loses her profession because her teaching qualifications do not transfer to France. She is a successful

immigrant a "modern évoluée," in her capacity to move to France and marry into a French family, but she is rejected by the nation, professionally and personally, as her French mother-in-law does not support the union.

It is hard to square NDiaye's reluctance to define identity and to be representative of an experience with the fact of being "intéressée et bouleversée par les histoires de réfugiés," and of wanting to depict the ongoing tragedy and these migrant "héros." We might consider *Trois femmes puissantes* to be appropriative, and the description of these individuals as "heroes" to be reductive and potentially harmful. Survival is not necessarily heroism when there is no alternative. Most vulnerable communities would likely prefer *not* to need to be heroic, and describing difficult survival as "heroic" absolves harmful structures of responsibility. In the context of the actual book, however, I believe that NDiaye is doing something more than just depicting "histoires de réfugiés."

Trois femmes puissantes acknowledges the problem of viewing persecuted individuals as "heroic" and gives witness to these stories and the complexities therein (three very different journeys), rather than educating the reader on an issue of "timely" significance. The stories are not tied to a specific moment in the migrant crisis and are just as relevant in 2022 as they were in 2009. Khady's story is the most difficult to square in this line of thinking, given the severe violence she suffers, but nevertheless suggests the idea of "heroic migrant stories" is false. Individual strength and exceptionalism cannot save the individual from collective violence. Not only is there Khady's death despite her best efforts at surviving, Fanta and Norah have achieved "migrant success" and both find themselves extremely unfulfilled and unsupported. The inclusion of their parents further demonstrates the unceasing nature of these issues. Exclusion renders meaningful engagement between individuals impossible even if circumstances change

or characters reunite, as the psychological damage of rejection is lasting, and this damage is compounded, as characters are rejected on a larger societal level (not welcomed into or accepted by the European nation), an interpersonal level (neglected by the family), and an individual level (self-doubt).

The stories share a theme of family abandonment and shortcomings. Norah is left in France by her father and has some underlying beliefs that this was her own fault; the bigotry of Rudy's mother has had a significant influence on his own behavior and in the language he uses toward his wife; and finally, Khady is abandoned by her in-laws when they are no longer beholden to her after the death of her husband, and partly because she was unable to have a child. The three women do not meaningfully know each other (or even *of* each other), but these connections show a smallness to the world despite the many miles travelled by these characters, all of whom have immigrated (or are trying too). Not all who seek to immigrate are successful, and those who do reach new nations do not necessarily find a better life, lacking social safety nets and support systems.

IV. Narrative Voice and Perspective

Trois femmes puissantes is often praised for its ability to elicit empathy in the reader by placing the reader in psychological proximity to the protagonists. The third-person presence is seemingly an extra-heterodiegetic narration, discussing the characters in the third-person and not as a presence in the text itself, and takes on first-person characteristics (such as the use of "maman" in the second story, rather than referring to "Rudy's mother"). In Khady's story, the narrative opens in the middle of Khady's inward consideration of her circumstance: "Lorsque les parents de son mari et les sœurs de son mari lui dirent ? ce qu'ils attendaient d'elle, lui dirent ce qu'elle allait être obligée de faire, Khady le savait déjà" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye

247). Information is revealed as Khady processes it and the reader is presented with the context of Khady's awareness before learning what she will need to do or why. The first and second stories open in similar ways: in chapter one,

> Et celui qui l'accueillit ou qui parut comme fortuitement sur le seuil de sa grande maison de béton, dans une intensité de lumière soudain si forte que son corps vêtu de clair paraissait la produire et la répandre lui-même, cet homme qui se tenait là, petit, alourdi, diffusant un éclat comme une ampoule au néon, cet homme surgi au seuil de sa maison démesurée n'avait plus rien, se dit aussitôt Norah, de sa superbe, de sa stature, de sa jeunesse auparavant si mystérieusement constante qu'elle semblait impérissable. (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 11)

While the second story begins:

> Tout au long de la matinée, comme les vestiges d'un rêve pénible et vaguement avilissant, la pensée l'accompagna qu'il aurait mieux fait de ne pas lui parler ainsi dans son propre intérêt, puis, à force de tours et de détours dans son esprit inquiet, cette idée se mua en certitude alors même qu'il en venait à ne plus très bien se rappeler le motif de la dispute ce rêve pénible et avilissant dont ne lui restait qu'un arrière-goût plein d'amertume" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 95)

Both of these stories begin in the middle of an event and the reader enters into an existing conflict. Norah "se dit" and Rudy experiences "les vestiges d'un rêve," experiencing these events but not reporting them directly, reinforcing the ambiguity of the narrative perspective. This reflects the reductive view of immigration often portrayed in media, in which immigrants often become faceless and nameless.

The reader occupies a space between the characters and the objective reality of their situation. This choice also facilitates the connection between the stories and affirms the consistent trauma. The use of the omniscient narrator is vital to the framing of stories two and three: in story two, the narration is in closest proximity to Rudy, but the judgements made by Rudy give the reader insight about Fanta (ex. "Quelle importance, avait dû répondre Fanta, qu'est-ce que cela t'enlève, à toi, que d'autres s'en sortent bien, avec cette irritante habitude qu'elle avait depuis peu de vouloir observer toute situation que d'un point de vue hautain,

magnanime, détaché…" [*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 100]). Khady's perspective is likewise at a separation from the reader, but it is the focus of the narration. A third-person narration provides information and perspective where Khady herself would not be able, because of a general naivité about world around her and the world she is going to ("nullité et absurdité de son existence").

Norah lives at a geographical and emotional distance from her brother and father, and partly blames herself for his imprisonment, asking "N'aurait-elle pas dû aller le voir plus souvent ou l'obliger, lui, à venir?" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 58). The narration acts as the internal voice of Norah, as she questions her effect on the behaviors of her father and brother, despite not being close with them. It is not suggested that her family members are considering her in the same way. The third-person omniscient narration also facilitates the reader's understanding of the ways in which the main protagonists inherit perceptions of the self not just from the society around them (notions of internalized misogyny, for example) but from the family, even when that family is absent. This is also true of Rudy, whose experiences with his wife are influenced by his mother.

Rudy's story opens with an inner monologue in free indirect discourse, written in the third-person with perspective that only Rudy himself could possess. The style and perspective are consistent throughout the beginning of the story: "Il n'aurait jamais, jamais dû lui parler ainsi voilà tout ce qu'il savait maintenant de cette querelle, voilà ce qui l'empêchait de se concentrer sans qu'il pût espérer en tirer avantage par ailleurs, plus tard, lorsqu'il rentrerait à la maison et la retrouverait, elle" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 95). The narrator continues:

> comment allait-il apaiser sa propre conscience si ses souvenirs tronqués de leurs conflits ne faisaient apparaître que sa culpabilité à lui [...] comme dans ces rêves pénibles et avilissants où, quoi que l'on dise, quoi que l'on décide, on est en faute, irrévocablement? Pourquoi, le temps passant, pourquoi, la belle jeunesse s'éloignant de lui, avait-il

> l'impression que seule la vie des autres, de presque tous les autres autour de lui, progressait naturellement sur un chemin de plus en plus dégagé que la lumière finale éclairait déjà de rayons chauds et tendres, ce qui leur permettait, à tous ces hommes de son entourage, de baisser leur garde et d'adopter vis-à-vis de l'existence une attitude décontractée, subtilement caustique mais imprégnée de la conscience discrète qu'un savoir essentiel leur était échu au prix de leur ventre souple et plat, de leur chevelure unie, de leur parfaite santé? Et je m'endeuille profondément, car je suis en grand effondrement. (95-96)

The use of "je" (which recurs in the chapter) suggests an interiority to this narrative perspective, oscillating between free indirect discourse and monologue. The repetition of certain words in the narration creates a sense of interior unease (for example, the repetition of "pourquoi," which reinforces that we're experiencing Rudy's interior thoughts, as there is someone posing the question). Rudy's focus during the entirety of this reflection on the language he has used toward his wife is not on his wife but rather how the scenario has affected his own ability to exist peacefully: "Oh, comme il aspirait à la quiétude, à la clarté!" (96) Rudy demonstrates an everyday and mundane prejudice perpetuated by self-aware individuals towards people they know.

V. The Successful Immigrant in France: Issues of Race, Gender, and Social Belonging

The format of three separate but loosely connected stories challenges a monolithic narrative of the "fleeing refugee" and of life in the home nation. Norah has professional success in France and has only rarely visited Senegal. Rudy's white French family moved to Senegal for the financial advantage of working in a resort town, and does not experience the difficulty or prejudice of Africans migrating to France. Fanta is promised great success in France but ultimately loses her profession and family upon moving. Khady's family believes Fanta must be making a lot of money as a teacher, showing the illusion of immigration held by those who remain in Africa, and Khady would not be immigrating had her husband not died. Khady's story most closely aligns with the stereotype of the persecuted "fleeing refugee." Khady's story most closely aligns with the stereotype of the persecuted "fleeing refugee." This book notes Senegal

and the city of Dakar, though in other works, NDiaye often chooses not to name specific cities. The choice here serves to individualize these stories in a media landscape that often refers to Africa as a singular state and identity.

As Laurence Roulleau-Berger notes in *Migrer au féminin*, migrant women are situated in a multiplicity of power hierarchies, and thus experience social inequality differently from men. Migrant women are potentially navigating class and gender inequality in their origin nations, class and gender inequalities in the receiving nation, decreased career prospects due to difference in qualification or social prejudice, and other systemic exclusionary practices. Norah, who moved to France as a child and thus has French qualifications and education, is able to find professional success while Fanta must settle for labour which does not reflect her skill or certifications. Despite her professional success, Norah still suffers in France, as her partner expects her to take care of him and their two children and does not equitably divide household and family labour.

Rudy and Fanta's story demonstrates that even for those who do successfully immigrate and find employment, the separation of culture, experience, and identity remains vast. Rudy is incapable of perceiving Fanta outside of his self-constructed role as her savior, a prejudiced and stereotypical vision of what he believes constitutes success for Fanta: marriage to a Frenchman and legal immigration to the *métropole*. Rudy's tumultuous relationship with Fanta is further complicated by his familial history: Rudy's father was imprisoned for murdering his Senegalese business partner. Rudy left Senegal after a violent fight with his students: "Il avait perdu réputation et dignité et il était rentré en France, entraînant Fanta, en sachant que la flétrissure le poursuivrait car elle était en lui et il s'était persuadé qu'il n'était plus que cela tout en la haïssant et la combattant" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 173). Later in the text, the

narrator remarks on the relationship between Rudy and his son, Djibril: "Le petit Djibril était né deux ans auparavant et c'était un enfant souriant et volubile dont nulle peur de son père, nulle gêne face à celui-ci ne venait encore creuser le front d'un pli perplexe" (177). The awareness of and guilt about his violent outburst and the ways it has affected his relationship with his son suggest a replication of Rudy's trauma, which is complicated by the identities of the victims of Rudy and his father. And Djibril's witnessing of Rudy's violent outburst suggests Rudy might be capable of inflicting such violence against Djibril. Both Rudy and his father attacked Senegalese individuals, and Rudy's treatment of Fanta suggests a power imbalance reflective of and resulting from historical colonial structures: French-speaking, married to a Frenchman, a professor of French literature — but not equal enough to avoid comments such as "Tu peux retourner d'où tu viens" (106) from even her husband.

In Dakar, Fanta taught French literature at a high school for children of military officers and wealthy businessmen. Rudy wonders "en persuadant de le suivre en France, il n'avait pas sciemment détourné le regard pour laisser au crime toute latitude de prendre ses aises en lui et s'il n'avait pas savouré cette sensation, celle de mal agir sans en avoir aucunement l'air" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 143). Not even veiling his racism, the narration describes Norah's features as obviously foreign, and as possessing a vitality that motivates her to become "un être instruit et cultivé, pour sortir de l'interminable réalité [...] de l'indigence" (117). Yet her professional opportunities in France are limited, and in clinging to and reminding Fanta of her difference, Rudy prevents her from existing independently. Rudy obtained his current job with the help of his mother, and her language concerning nationality and foreignness is sprinkled throughout his own discourse, making note of appearances and the character traits of Americans, Australians, and Gypsies in particular. This third-person interior narration

heightens the ambiguity of Rudy's thoughts and behaviors, as we are privy to the harm he causes (i.e. violent outburst; racist language), environmental factors that might have contributed to this harm (i.e. violent father; racist mother, and distant visions of the effects of this harm (i.e. distance from son and wife).

The more Rudy asserts dominance over Fanta, their relationship becomes increasingly unequal, and he responds by becoming increasingly paranoid and controlling. Rudy feels shame about their life in France: "Il lui aurait suffi, à lui, Rudy Descas, il s'en serait contenté avec gratitude, de n'être chargé de nul autre devoir que de celui d'aimer Fanta. Mais il avait l'impression que c'était trop peu pour elle et [...] il lui devait bien davantage qu'une assez grossière petite maison dans la campagne, laborieusement payée à crédit, et toute la vie y afférente, toute cette modicité qui le mettait hors de lui" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 105). This small detail, that "il s'épuisait à démontrer qu'il n'était pas réduit à ce qu'il avait l'air d'être," (105) points to the ways in which Rudy's self-judgment and shame are a symptom of an internalized notion of masculinity that he is unable to fulfill, and the ways this masculinity affects his marriage.

Rudy also feels a competition with Fanta vis-à-vis their son, with whom he has a strained relationship. Rudy's fears might originate Rudy's own attachment to his mother and the loss of his father, and a subsequent fear of harming Djibril the way his own father harmed him. And despite being in his home nation, unlike Norah and Fanta, he is never *literally* at home — the entire story takes place outside of their house, and he has to consciously instruct himself to refer to it as his home, which he finds annoying and painful because they do not own a very nice house. This contrasts with the moment Fanta first invites Rudy to her home in Senegal:

> Il s'était avancé non sans timidité ni quelque gêne mais, surtout, la reconnaissance le rendait muet soudain. Car dans la pénombre glauque le regard de Fanta lui disait,

> calmement: Voilà, c'est ici que j'habite, c'est chez moi. Acceptant, ce regard, le jugement d'un étranger au front blanc (qu'important son hâle en cet instant!), à la mèche blonde, aux mains blanches et lisses, sur son foyer bien tenu mais si humble l'acceptant et en assumant par avance les possibles effets, les sentiments éventuels de malaise ou de condescendance. […] Mais elle l'avait fait venir là, chez elle, et voilà que d'un geste et de quelques mots brefs elle lui présentait l'oncle, la tante, une voisine, d'autres gens encore que la faible clarté lacustre découvrait peu à peu à Rudy dans le fond de la pièce […] et il se sentait déplacé et voyant avec ses grandes mains dont il ne savait que faire, dont la pâleur rayonnait comme devaient rayonner dans le clair-obscur son front black, sa longue mèche blonde et lisse. (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 132)

The subjectivity of the narrative voice is integral to communicating what Fanta left behind in Senegal. For Rudy, the home is a physical structure signifying some measure of success in which happiness should dwell, as opposed to Fanta's home, which embodies family. He has a subconscious vision of himself opening the windows of a nearby chateau and feels carried away by love, but the feeling quickly passes as he notes Fanta will choose Djibril over him. He thinks his meager salary makes him unappealing: he lost the youth "qui moirait autrefois son œil clair et bleu comme celui de maman" (130). Rudy interprets his family failures as economic rather than due to his cruelty toward his wife.

Rudy's fantasy of his younger self is rooted in whiteness. He notes his mother would even bleach his hair as a child so as to appear blonder while they travelled in Senegal, meaning his whiteness is constructed as an opposition to non-whiteness. Fanta is "consciente de tout, lucide et fine et d'une perspicacité exacerbée mais aussi profondément indifférente, par orgueil, à l'opinion sur son logis ou sur elle-même d'un homme au front si blanc, aux mains si blanches et si lisses" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 132) and Rudy "pouvait le sentir, il pouvait presque l'entendre" (132). This description further ties Rudy to his mother, from whom he has inherited his blue eyes and pale face, and the repetition of "si" emphasizes the difference between the two appearances. Rudy specifically describes himself as a foreigner in Senegal, though the

experience of physical and cultural difference has evidently not encouraged him to consider Fanta's journey in France.

Rudy's ponders calling Fanta: "Il fut tenté de rentrer dans la cabine, de rappeler Fanta, non pour vérifier qu'elle était bien à la maison (encore que, songea-t-il dans le même temps, soudain inquiet et mal à l'aise, mais pour lui promettre que tout allait s'arranger)" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 128). The parenthetical interjection is a real-time interruption of thought, and this sentence is quite symbolic overall of Rudy's approach to his relationship with Fanta. Rudy notes that "la frêle, si frêle et instable armature de son existence ne tenait à peu près debout que parce que Fanta, malgré tout, était là, et qu'elle fût là davantage comme une poulette aux ailes rognées pour que la moindre clôture lui soit infranchissable, que comme l'être humain indépendant et crâne qu'il avait rencontré au lycée Mermoz, il en supportait l'idée, avec grande difficulté et grande honte, uniquement parce que cette triste situation était provisoire à ses yeux" (129). He associates Fanta with the home space, signifying a physical belonging in the way of domestic ownership. Rudy attributes his unhappiness to ways in which the world is cruel *towards him*, rather than due to the ways he interacts *with* the world.

VI. Metamorphosis and Escape: Trois oiseaux survivantes

NDiaye highlights the physical aspects of a defined national racial identity, which is not erased in a universalist society and which is maintained and passed down by a white bourgeoisie. Rudy's measured acceptance of Fanta represents the limits of western acceptance of "the other" and demonstrates a type of model minority narrative. Rudy himself defines the threshold by which Fanta is allowed to be "different," and it correlates with her professional and academic achievements. For example, Rudy is impressed that she was able to become a teacher despite coming from a lower-class Senegalese family.

While the women characters turn into birds (an animal that migrates) and leave the despair of their familial conditions, Rudy is compared to a bird that is raised for meat. The narration most frequently describes his emotions for and about Fanta using the words "compassion" and "love," rather than empathizing with or understanding, though does concede understanding why she might stray from their marriage: "je la comprends, à tel point que je peux m'imaginer si j'étais femme, céder joyeusement et simplement à la séduction peu compliquée de Manille — oh, comme je la comprends et comme je lui en veux" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 135). He describes his employer, Manille, and his late father, Abel Descas, as ambitious "hommes aux désirs pragmatiques mais non moins ardents que s'ils étaient spirituels s'éprouvaient jamais le sentiment qu'il leur fallait lutter jour après jour contre les figures glaciales de quelque rêve infini, monocorde et subtilement dégradant" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 168). Rudy's father, Abel Descas, immigrated in the opposite manner of Fanta: travelling from his province, through Spain, Morocco, Mauritania, and settling in Senegal to fund a vacation resort in Dara Salam — a relocation that will, many years later, influence Rudy into abusing one of his students, the impetus for Rudy and Fanta's relocation to France.

Rudy feels especially fond of a group of three students are Black and from modest families. One of the students is the son of a fisherman in Dara Salam — the village in which Rudy's father opened his resort, and where he murdered his business partner. Rudy associates the student with the shame and deep anxiety he feels about his father's crime: "la figure du garçon l'obligeait à penser à Dara Salam. Il luttait avec horreur contre toute vision de Dara Salam. Et cette lutte se transformait en affection disproportionnée pour l'adolescent, cette affection qui était peut-être de la haine" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 177). The kindness Rudy claims to exhibit toward the boy is a means of disguising the hatred and anxiety he feels toward

his family. When the boy calls Rudy the son of a murderer after class, Rudy tries to strangle him "il se souvenait de n'avoir pensé, en appuyant sur le cou du garçon, qu'à la chair tendre du petit Djibril, son fils qu'il baignait chaque soir" (176). Rudy stops himself, but he grows to resent Djibril, who witnessed the event at the age of two. Rudy's anxiety and shame become directed toward his son and, eventually, reciprocated by Djibril: upon being picked up from school by Rudy instead of Fanta, the seven-year-old Djibril grows extremely nervous, and asks Rudy if his mother is alright, not trusting his father's presence.

The cycle of anxiety and resentment between father and son, which began with by Abel's murder of his business partner (and his subsequent suicide, after which Rudy and his mother returned to France) has been replicated in the relationship between Djibril and Rudy, and Rudy's monologue frantic, riddled with a restless angst and questions suggests a path of which Rudy is aware but cannot prevent. His fear and shame of Djibril only briefly subsides when he becomes defensive of his son. After fetching Djibril from school, they visit Rudy's mother, despite Djibril's hesitancy. They arrive to a neighbor boy eating a snack at her table, and Rudy's mother has sketched the boy as an angel flying above adults. The boy is eating homemade shortbread usually reserved for special occasions. The boy "avait environ l'âge de Djibril. C'était un bel enfant aux yeux clairs, aux cheveux blonds bouclés. Rudy eut une sorte de haut-le-cœur" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 237). Each sentence begins a new paragraph, signifying Rudy is processing this in real time. It is a boy who reminds her of Rudy as a child and who can be interpreted as the white grandson she believes she should have: "il n'y avait nulle autre cause à l'avide félicité, à l'éclat dur et heureux du visage de maman que la présence de ce garçon dans sa cuisine" (238).

Rudy's mother announces that "L'amitié, ça n'existe pas là-bas. Ils peuvent croire en Dieu mais les anges, ils les méprisent, ils en rigolent. […] Tu es trop blanc et trop blond, ils en auraient profité, ils se seraient acharnés à te détruire. Même l'amour, ça n'existe pas là-bas. Ta femme, elle t'a pris par intérêt. Ils ne savent pas ce que c'est que l'amour, ils ne pensent qu'à la situation et à l'argent" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 243). Rudy's mother's racism manifests in broad judgments on the moral, intellectual, and religious qualities of the habitants of the Senegalese village they lived in. This is made more explicit by her admitted preference for blondness and blue eyes. She so privileged Frenchness and a public performance of whiteness that even though she tells Rudy he would never have been accepted in Senegal explicitly *because* of his blond hair, she bleached his hair as a child so that he would appear more blond. She did not seek acceptance in Senegal, but a difference that beget dominance.

Rudy and Djibril leave Rudy's mother's home together and Rudy sees "quelque masse indistincte" in front of the car and "il se fut demandé si ses yeux avaient vu quelque chose" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 244). Djibril and Rudy have run over a bird. The narration is extremely vague, but the bird could symbolize or embody Fanta. Rudy "secouait la tête de nouveau, seul au volant de sa voiture immobile, dans le silence tout vibrant de chaleur, et il se sentait happé, déchiré par le même effroi profondément déconcerté qui l'avait laissé transi et fasciné et seulement capable d'un affreux petit sourire incongru" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 136), pondering the affair he believes Fanta is having. This information is shared with him by his mother. It is not clear where or what occurred or why his mother knows, only that he was apparently told in the living room of a house that was not his own: "il ne savait quel salon où il se trouvait en visite. [. . .] ce devait être maman car ni la Pulmaire ni une cliente quelconque n'aurait pu considérer l'affaire avec autant de dépit" (136-137). His car is attacked

by the buzzard, and the claws cut into Rudy's head when he gets out of his car. He believes Fanta sent this bird to check on him and he feels himself trapped by Fanta's wish for freedom. Driving over the bird (a mirroring of his father's crime, which also occurred in a car) is an attack on Fanta's mobility and liberty.

Fanta is absent from the story until the very end. She appears in the eyes of her neighbor, whose perspective replaces Rudy's as she waves to Fanta across the garden. Fanta's neighbor describes her with birdlike characteristics: "le long cou et la petite tête délicate" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 245). Fanta ends the story in her same position without having spoken. The shared wave "Elle salua Pulmaire, doucement, avec intention et volonté, elle la salua" (245) suggests there is a power in being perceived, and the ambiguous ending (we do not know what happens to Fanta beyond this wave) suggests there are limits to welcoming the other.

Norah and Rudy (and by extension, Fanta) are beholden to a European consciousness, while Khady occupies a separate non-*métropole* perspective. The combined experience of these stories is pessimistic: Khady leaves for France at the urging of her mother-in-law, who instructs Khady to find Fanta and to send money back to the family. Khady's mother-in-law's expectations do not match the actual circumstances of Khady's voyage or Fanta's life.

VII. Une femme (im)puissante: Morality, Humanness, and Suffering

Khady's experience is extremely gendered and her story symbolizes a moral and fragile humanity. She is dehumanized ("écartée de la communauté humaine") yet strong ("surhumain"). She resists victimhood but is also literally unable to escape being a victim to her circumstances and environment. She suffers great violence and her injuries are lasting: her leg wound does not heal, her disease and the physical injuries from forced sex work (which also

bring pain to the men she services, meaning the men who are harming her are blaming her and further abusing her for the condition they put her in), and back pains.

Khady's violent death is a manifestation of border and immigrant tropes, and the fears media and governments elicit with such imagery: the diseased other breaking into a home nation, bringing violence and poverty. Her experience represents the lack of legal and safe migration between countries in Africa and countries in Europe. She forms an alliance with Lamine, a man making the same journey who appears to want to help her. They begin travelling as a couple and Khady prostitutes her body to pay for their room and board. She begins saving money for their shared trip, repeating her name to herself to affirm her autonomy, and comforting herself with the possibilities the money will afford them. Lamine steals all of her funds and leaves without her. Khady is alone, starving, and extremely sick. Lamine ultimately does reach France and hopes the girl he stole from has forgiven him. Norah's father and Fanta's husband likewise expect these women to forgive them and help them find success.

This depiction of immigration challenges typical narratives by demonstrating the difficulties faced by "successful" migrants such as Norah and the rejection faced by migrants such as Khady Demba. There is also a certain ambivalence in NDiaye's depiction of migration, in that all of these stories end with the implied continued suffering of their protagonists. Khady is entirely at the mercy of her class, family, body, and geographic condition and her status as a "femme puissante" forces the reader to reconceptualize the notion of power and its futility. Khady's inner narrative contrasted with the actual plot demonstrates the limits of empathy without political solutions: her monologue stresses an inherent value in her humanity but her inner strength and confidence are not only at odds with the way the world treats her but are irrelevant to the global practices like regulated immigration, closed borders, nations

impoverished by colonialism, which function with such systems of displacement and also to the individuals who might help (such as Lamine, wracked with "incredible shame").

Khady's mother-in-law believes Fanta has found wealth in France and will be able to support Khady. On her journey, Khady meets countless other refugees "les visages gommés par le soir, sans âge, ni traits de femmes, d'hommes, d'enfants" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 275). The faceless, anonymous quality of the people Khady emphasizes the vast number of individuals following this same path and the ways in which western society views them. The sheer number of people underlines the precarity of this path as a means of social or economic mobility. The refrain of "Khady Demba" then counters this monolith, repeatedly highlighting the individuality of a journey and life. The ordering of the stories highlights this: we begin with a narrative of what appears to be success (Norah), are then met with the hidden realities of immigrating to France and French opinions towards immigrants (Rudy/Fanta), and finish with a brutal depiction of the realities of borders.

Each of these stories depicts the harms of patriarchy, but Khady's situation is particularly tied to her gender identity. She is widowed, poor, childless, and not trained or educated for work in France:

> "Parce que leur fils unique l'avait épousée en dépit de leurs objections, parce qu'elle n'avait pas enfanté et qu'elle ne jouissait d'aucune protection, ils l'avaient tacitement, naturellement, sans haine ni arrière-pensée, écartée de la communauté humaine, et leurs yeux durs, étrécis, leurs yeux de vieilles gens qui se posaient sur elle ne distinguaient pas entre cette forme nommée Khady et celles, innombrables, des bêtes et des choses qui se trouvent aussi habiter le monde.
> Khady savait qu'ils avaient tort mais qu'elle n'avait aucun moyen de leur montrer, autre que d'être là dans l'évidence de sa ressemblance avec eux, et sachant que cela n'était pas suffisant elle avait cessé de se soucier de leur prouver son humanité" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 256).

She is rejected from "la communauté" because she could not give their only son a child, depicting the precarity of Khady's welcoming into this family. She still finds herself worthy

because she has experienced affection: "elle avait toujours eu conscience d'être unique en tant que personne et, d'une certaine façon, indémontrable mais non-contestable, qu'on ne pouvait la remplacer, elle Khady Demba, exactement, quand bien même ses parents n'avait besoin ni envi qu'elle fût là" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 253-254). She is unwanted by her parents because she was born a woman, and she is unwanted by her in-laws because she cannot complete the task of a married woman.

> Elle avait été satisfaite d'être Khady, il n'y avait eu nul interstice dubitatif entre elle et l'implacable réalité du personnage de Khady Demba. [...] Il lui était même arrivé de se sentir fière d'être Khady car, avait-elle songé souvent avec éblouissement, les enfants dont la vie semblait joyeuse, qui mangeaient chaque jour leur bonne part de poulet ou de poisson et qui portaient à l'école des vêtements sans taches ni déchirures, ces enfants-là n'étaient pas plus humains que Khady Demba qui n'avait pourtant, elle, qu'une infime portion de vie.
> À présent encore c'était quelque chose dont elle ne doutait pas qu'elle était indivisible et précieuse, et qu'elle ne pouvait qu'elle-même.
> Elle se sentait seulement fatiguée d'exister et lasse des vexations, même si ces dernières ne lui causaient pas de réelle douleur." (254)

These two paragraphs demonstrate the discord between Khady's view of herself and the way the world assigns meaning to her.

The narration illustrations the psychological toll endured by these characters and the degree to which racism, misogyny, and economic and social disparity are a violence, despite, for example, Khady's assertion that she is only tired and has not experienced a "réelle douleur." The third-person narration avoids a minimizing portrayal of Khady's harm or a misattribution of its root causes because the reader can see that she *has* experienced a "réelle douleur," and she never once brought it upon herself. This coincides with the result of the narration in Fanta's story, where Rudy minimizes certain consequences of his aggressions, and the reader can still confront them because we have access to Rudy's perspective but are not limited to a potentially myopic first-person recounting of that perspective.

VIII. Stigmatisation and Transformation

The cultural other is translated and relayed back through analysis of the familiar as well as via analysis of stigmatisation and racialization. NDiaye's work combines this exceptionality (the magical qualities and strangeness within her stories) with depiction of the everyday and of the mundane, illustrating the ominous and ever-present nature of stigmatisation and hyper-racialized identities in France. While not as fantastical as some of her other works, there are strange elements sprinkled throughout the book, particularly in her depiction of people as birds. For example, this description of Norah's father: "Pauvre de lui, qui aurait pensé qu'il deviendrait un vieil oiseau épais, à la volée malhabile et aux fortes émanations?" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 20), which becomes increasingly unsettling as other characters become or appear to inhabit birds.

Norah's story begins with her aging father. His health is declining along with his status as patriarch of his family. The narration asks of Norah: "Était-ce parce que cet homme débraillé avait perdu toute légitimité pour porter sur elle un regard critique ou déçu ou sévère, ou parce que, forte de ses trente-huit ans, elle ne s'inquiétait plus avant toute chose du jugement provoqué par son apparence" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 14). Norah reflects on the "remarques cruelles offensantes, proférées" her father would make about her and her sister with regards to their looks. Her relationship with her father has severely impacted her own family and she wonders what led her to let a partner into her life, as her partner and his daughter are "mal charmant." Norah "n'avait plus l'espoir d'une vie de famille ordonnée, sobre, harmonieuse" (31). She seeks a nuclear family unit she did not experience in childhood, and which she seemingly did not experience following the birth of her daughter; however, Norah's

partnership with Jakob only burdens her, as she works and acts as primary caretaker to Jakob's daughter, while Jakob sleeps in and ignores the children, and even requires caretaking himself.

NDiaye writes of a "démon assis sur le ventre du garçon de cinq ans et ne l'avait plus quitté," "rêve pénible et avilissant," "songeries laiteuses," another démon "assis sur le ventre de [la] soeur," "une panique fugace vida son esprit. Car sur son ventre à elle aussi un démon s'était assis." The "démon assis sur le ventre" in Norah's story, for example, symbolizes the physical manifestation of suffering caused by and inherited from the father. This technique creates a relationship between the inner perspective of these characters alongside the difficulty in changing their social (familial, economic, political, etc.) position signifies a certain powerlessness, highlighting the paradox in the title: even the most determined of women are powerless in the face of societal and familial violence.

For Norah, Fanta, and Khady, the transformation into birds is accompanied by other characters doubting their reality or causing distrust. Norah is unsure about the reality of her brother's crime and is misled by her father; Fanta was intentionally misled about her job prospects in France; Khady is lied to by Lamine, who also steals her money. When the psychic reality of these characters becomes destabilized, they escape it by becoming birds. This will also be reflected in one of the transformations in *Ladivine*, in which a character transforms into a dog after being doubted by her family. Transformation is a means of bypassing the emotional separation between these characters, and seems to signal an inability for people to embrace one another without traversing a human psychic space. *Trois femmes puissantes*, birds are able to voyage where people cannot. Norah, unable to adapt into the home of her father, settles into the tree in his courtyard; Rudy believes a bird has been sent by his wife to follow him after he

picks up their son without her knowledge; Khady, who cannot reach France, pays visit to Lamine in Paris.

IX. Everyday Violence and Futile Heroism

Pap Ndiaye writes in *La Condition noire* that a shared experience of discrimination creates new forms of solidarity and identification. However, the *trois femmes puissantes* — estranged and abandoned — do not experience solidarity with or welcoming from characters in the text. They can find recognition only in being witnessed and shown empathy by the reader. James Dawes, director of the Program in Human Rights and Humanitarianism at Macalester College, notes that "human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of storytelling," and notes the ethical tension between artistic depiction of identity, violence, and trauma and truth of individual experience, and the discord between universalizing narratives that remain respectful towards cultural diversity. Dawes asks, "How can you tell the story of somebody's most abject moments without also in some way reproducing the pain of those moments?" (Dawes 402). The focus on Khady's extremely violent and traumatic story and the descriptions of the book being NDiaye's "most African" novel (despite the longest story occurring in the Gironde region of France, where NDiaye is from) demonstrates whose alterity interests the public, and what purpose it serves in political and literary spaces.

Women's rights are often instrumentalized in discussions of immigration and colonial interference, and human rights are frequently used as justification for political actions that in fact undermine rights in the name of promoting democracy or political stability, a concept described as "imperial feminism" or "colonial feminism" (for example, using the feminist language of "women's liberation" to sell the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Laura Bush's many speeches about freeing Iraqi women from the Taliban as a main cause for

the war). In *Trois femmes puissantes*, this is reflected in the disconnect between the title and the lived experiences of the characters, forcing us to question what women we perceive as powerful and what women we perceive as powerless.

Khady's name is a consistent refrain throughout her story, repeating in nearly every paragraph that is directly about her. Khady's own beliefs about her irreplaceability and the satisfaction she finds in herself is contrasted by the anonymity of the fellow migrants she comes across and even by the limited knowledge Khady and her family have of Fanta's current position ("elle doit être riche maintenant, elle est professeur"; "une cousine qui avait épousé un Blanc et qui vivait maintenant en France" (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 259). Fanta wears a skirt adorned with "[des] gais visages féminins, bruns sur fond rouge, surmontant l'inscription 'Année de la Femme Africaine'" (259). This small detail references a singular view of the "African woman" that does not reflect the reality of the women in this book.

For these three characters, there is pain and shame in being perceived but not wanted. For each character, there is a pain in knowing how their family members have shaped their personhood: Norah's comments on her body and struggles with her husband; Rudy's anger at his father's crime without having participated in it or without knowing what even occurred, and his frustration that he cannot ask because Abel is dead; Khady's discovery of the violence and rejection that will line her journey to France. And while Khady is the character with the greatest conviction in her worth (the refrains about her humanity), believing in her humanity does not make it so and she eventually becomes literally nonhuman (256).

Each of the protagonists is incapable of exteriorizing their emotions so as to be understood by their family and in not relating to their family, they also struggle with controlling and understanding their emotions themselves, only finding relief as birds. The transformation

itself is not explicitly described, but characters are perceived as birdlike by secondary characters: Norah is described as being perched in a tree; Djibril tells his father they've run over a bird with their car; Fanta's neighbor turns her gaze to "fenêtre du salon face au fauteuil et vit de l'autre côté de la haie le long cou et la petite tête délicate de sa voisine qui paraissaient surgir du laurier comme une branche miraculeuse, un improbable surgeon pourvu d'yeux grands ouverts sur le jardin de Pulmaire" (245); finally, at the end of Norah's chapter, the perspective changes to Lamine's, as he watches a bird in the sky and thanks Khady.

The transformation into birds allows the women to escape humanity, and also reflects a capacity to freely migrate (Khady is able to reach France after transforming into a bird, unlike her human self). These transformations also represent a dissociation from reality as a response to the various traumas they have suffered. Metamorphoses is most clearly liberating in the case of Khady, illustrating the arbitrariness of human borders and the harm and absurdity of the human structures (the wall) enforcing them. Khady cannot summit the wall, but as a bird she easily reaches Paris. We can additionally reflect on the causative relation between ecological disaster and increases in migration, in a consideration echoes of eco-fiction in *Trois femmes puissantes*. It does not explicitly portray the environmental apocalypse, but neither does it explicitly portray the political causes of migration crises.

X. Conclusion

NDiaye's depiction of marginalization is not apolitical but is, in some ways, mundane; an everyday experience in an unequal yet professed universal society, particularly uninteresting in comparison to the otherworldly experiences that befall these protagonists. *Trois femmes puissantes* shows that representation is not enough: from describing Khady as "une nouvelle Cendrillon," to members of Goncourt committee referring to NDiaye as "un métissage réussi"

and a politically correct selection because she is a woman, the reception of *Trois femmes puissantes* is just as illustrative of western depictions and understanding of "otherness" as the stories themselves. We can consider Rudy's narrative a demonstration of the gap between one's actual behavior toward the other and neoliberal acceptance of the other: Rudy's racism, which manifests both subtly and overtly, as well as the shame he feels about these beliefs and his unwillingness to either name or confront them. NDiaye's fictionalization demonstrations the limits to depicting political trauma and humanitarian crises. This is particularly striking when read in conjunction with the subsequent work *Ladivine*, which depicts what might be read as an alternative to the outcomes for the characters in *Trois femmes puissantes*. The book's title is also in contrast to *Trois femmes puissantes*: *Ladivine*, the shared first name of two protagonists, creating more identity and agency for the characters.

Trois femmes puissantes gives individual value to the real-world equivalent of these characters, who are erased by the countries and systems that will not welcome them. The reader can (personally) welcome the stranger but, like Lamine thanking Khady after she has died, does not have the capacity to make amends. NDiaye's fiction reflects conditions of empathy (hearing the strange other, imagining the complexity of their experience, wishing them relief) without the capacity to actually respond to it, due to the narration lacking a clear authorial presence or judgement. Just like Fanta's neighbor small wave of acknowledgment, we are stuck in a cycle of witnessing and acknowledging, powerless to change the systems from which inequality and cruelty stem.

IV. CHAPTER 3
FRAGILE IDENTITIES AND *RÉCITS SOUTERRAINS*: CYCLES OF (NON)BELONGING IN *LADIVINE*

Marie NDiaye followed *Trois femmes puissantes* with the novel *Ladivine*, published by Gallimard in 2013. Like *La Naufragée*, *Trois femmes puissantes*, and *Un pas de chat sauvage*, *Ladivine* explores bicultural and biracial identity, class, gender, Frenchness, and race. NDiaye builds on her fascination with memory and the connections formed (or denied) between women across eras and identities. *Ladivine* is the only book amongst this selection that is not tied to historical events, and despite being fiction, and despite NDiaye's continued commitment to the strange and ambiguous (we will see a return, for example, of animal metamorphosis and unnamed settings), I propose that *Ladivine* is one of her most personal works to date, offering a *récit souterrain*[34] and utilizing a subversion of "narrative intimacy" to create a strange bond between the text and the reader, as opposed to the protagonist and the reader, inhibiting a reader's empathy for the characters.

We will discuss *Ladivine* as a subversion of the "récit de filiation," in which the main characters search for heritage and lost memories. NDiaye welcomes her reader into an atmosphere of alienation, where they are haunted by the same stigmas of the characters – and almost certainly some of their own, given the capacity of NDiaye's ambiguous difference (i.e. not explicitly stating why characters are stigmatized or even affirming that they are) to create a universal alterity even when it is rooted in a specific identity or experience. The reader is

[34] "Récit souterrain" is the term used to describe the Mercure de France *Traits et portraits* series for which NDiaye wrote her self-portrait, *Autoportrait en vert*, which we will touch on at the end of this chapter. *Traits et portraits* is described on the publisher's website as: "*Traits et portraits* accueille et réunit écrivains, poètes, cinéastes, peintres ou créateurs de mode. Chacun s'essaie à l'exercice de l'autoportrait. Les textes sont ponctués de dessins, d'images, de tableaux ou de photos qui habitent les livres comme une autre voix en écho, formant presque un récit souterrain" (Traits et Portraits).

immersed in what *Un pas de chat sauvage* refers to as "une fragilité psychologique" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 14).

For the narrator of *Un pas de chat sauvage*, the "fragilité psychologique" partly originates in her anxieties about researching the forgotten singer Maria Martinez. She describes "des scrupules, des effrois mystiques ainsi que des réticences féminines (broyer la vie d'une autre femme pour extraire quelle vérité sur celle de mes contemporaines?) qui m'empêchaient seuls, croyais-je, de bouleverser son repos" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 14). Fictionalizing Martinez's story creates distance between the author, the reader, and Maria Martinez, so that the decision to "broyer la vie d'une autre femme" leans more on the author's and the reader's interpretation of the event as opposed to a potentially exploitative depiction of an unknowable but lived true experience, about which the subject cannot comment (for example, the critiques of *The Slave Ship* discussed in chapter 1). Yet as *Un pas de chat sauvage* depicts, it is not possible to entirely abandon the real when exploring the lived experiences of an historical figure: the author and the reader both become entangled in the fiction as they are given material in which to perceive themselves and the world they inhabit.

The narrator of *Un pas de chat sauvage* continues: "il me sembla […] qu'elle seule (la découverte de son visage, la perception de son être) saurait me permettre d'habiter de nouveau là d'où je m'étais moi-même bannie" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 14). The *visage* as a representation of unperceived identity will reappear in *Ladivine*, as will the language and act of performance. The *Ladivine* women are playacting (and seeking to "pass" as) various identities, to differing degrees of success: motherhood, whiteness, Frenchness, the fact of being a daughter, and belonging to nuclear and middle-class families. NDiaye answers the problem of nationalized conceptions of an imaginary biological concept by rendering them mythical and

fictional. *Ladivine* will conclude our curated ndiayïenne triptych with a fictionalization of the personal, as opposed to the fictionalization of the historical in *La Naufragée* and of the contemporary political in *Trois femmes puissantes* (with the caveat that NDiaye is not wholly absent from any of these works). The psychological fragility described in *Un pas de chat sauvage* and demonstrated in *Ladivine* depicts the tangible effects of racial and social identities on the protagonists, despite (or because of) the subjectivity inherent to the construction and perception of these identities.

We will begin with an overview of the rather complicated plot of *Ladivine*, which is at times hard to follow due to duplicate character names and changes in narrative focus. We will then discuss the critical reception of *Ladivine*, which is interesting to consider compared to the award-winning and culturally popular but less lauded *Trois femmes puissantes*. The difference in their readerships points to the complex interior psychological stigma created and depicted by *Ladivine*, whereas it is easier to vaguely attribute the injustices in *Trois femmes puissantes* to society at large or to more explicitly prejudiced people and systems issues for *other* people to handle as opposed to the subtler microaggressions of *Ladivine* (in addition, of course, to the popularity carried by winning a Prix Goncourt). We will then discuss motherhood, the relationships between mothers and daughters, and the ways in which identity is inherited and re-crafted matrilineally. We will continue by examining violence as colonial and patrilineal inheritance and the ways in which violence manifests in white male characters as opposed to the biracial and bicultural female characters, before discussing marriage and foreignness. We will then discuss *Ladivine* as a "racial passing" novel (that is to say, a novel in which a character who is not white "passes" as white) before moving into the animal transformations that occur in *Ladivine*. We will discuss these metamorphoses as an allegory for alterity, as well as their

literary and biblical allusions. We will move into a discussion of the narration of *Ladivine*, which remains in third-person for the entirety of the novel but switches interior perspective between the protagonists. Finally, will consider the potentially personal and autobiographical elements of *Ladivine* and ways they contribute to immersion of the reader in a ndiayïenne "psychological fragility."

Reading *Ladivine* as a refusal to enter the minds of the characters demonstrates exactly what the novel is striving to do: an immersive and destabilizing experience of nonbelonging. The use of free indirect discourse reinforces this uncanny by immersing her reader *just* enough in the perspective and experience of the character that they know the characters are unsettled by *something* (the flow of questions, for example), without the reader knowing what is occurring or how the characters truly feel. Unsettling the reader in this way avoids an empathy rooted in pity or judgment as some critics charged regarding Khady Demba's story in *Trois femmes puissantes* by creating one based in communal uncertainty.

I. Summary of *Ladivine*

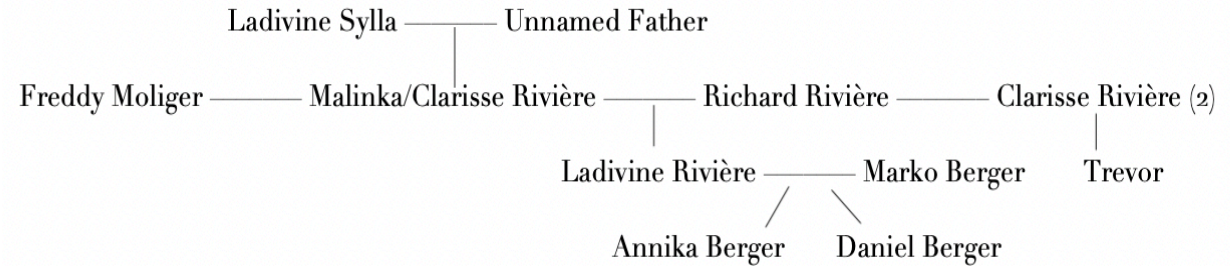

Figure 3: Family tree of Ladivine Sylla's family (*SOURCE*: Own image)

Ladivine begins in France in an unspecified year. The narration opens with a focus on Malinka Sylla, the daughter of Ladivine Sylla (who we will continue to refer to as Ladivine Sylla, so as to differentiate from Ladivine Rivière, her granddaughter). There are very few signifiers

as to what era this book occurs in, as is typical of NDiaye's writing, but references to the internet, francs, and DVDs suggest that part II (Ladivine Rivière) occurs in the very early 2000s.

In Part I, a teenage Malinka Sylla changes her name to the more French *Clarisse*, a name she adopts from a classmate[35]. Clarisse/Malinka (who we will refer to as Clarisse Rivière) does not know her father and is implied to be biracial. When not seen nearby her visibly Black mother, Clarisse is able to pass as white. Clarisse Rivière leaves home for the south of France. When Ladivine Sylla finds Clarisse, the patron of the restaurant perceives they are related, demonstrating Clarisse's racial ambiguity and tenuous capacity to "pass" as white.

Ladivine Sylla is hidden from everyone in Clarisse's life, including Clarisse's white French husband, Richard Rivière. Richard and Clarisse Rivière have one child named Ladivine Rivière. Richard Rivière's parents (upper-middle class, French, and white) do not know Clarisse is biracial, from a poor background, or that she is the daughter of an immigrant, but they are displeased with the marriage. Richard Rivière's parents visit Clarisse, Richard, and the infant Ladivine Rivière with a pet dog whose eyes are identical to Ladivine Sylla's and this is the only implied meeting between Ladivine Sylla and Ladivine Rivière. Richard Rivière will eventually divorce Clarisse, believing that she is hiding something. Richard marries another woman named Clarisse, who is white and French. The original Clarisse Rivière dates a man named Freddy

[35] Primary education and teaching are a frequent theme in NDiaye's writing, and we might interpret this as symbolic of the transmission of French patrimony and identity via the French school system, the failure to truly change or erase the home/family identity, as well as the unique difficulties of education for students whose parents have immigrated. Clarisse is deeply afraid of her teachers and classmates perceiving her mother and realizing she is not French-born like they are. Clarisse's grades eventually begin to slip and she hides the report cards from her mother so that Ladivine Sylla will not have to sign them. She mimics her classmates but does not fully grasp the expectations of her instructors. Her teacher asks to meet with her mother, though Clarisse keeps this a secret from Ladivine Sylla and decides to instead abandon school during summer vacation. Ladivine Sylla accepts this without comment and finds her daughter a job as a babysitter, which is Clarisse's first introduction to life away from home, as she travels to Arcachon, France with the family she works for.

Moliger, who meets Ladivine Sylla, as Clarisse Rivière includes Ladivine Sylla more in her life in an attempt to undo the shame she feels about having neglected her mother. Freddy murders Clarisse when she receives a gift from her daughter and he becomes violently jealous.

After Clarisse's murder, the story switches interior narrative focus to Ladivine Sylla, who learns about her daughter's murder from the cover of *Sud-Ouest* while grocery shopping. Ladivine Sylla's emotions are only explored very briefly. Ladivine Sylla is ecstatic at meeting Freddy Moliger and at finally being more included in her daughter's life, both because she loves her daughter and because she has no one else. She is hurt by her daughter and deeply wishes to meet her granddaughter.

The narration shifts to Ladivine Rivière. She lives in Berlin with her German husband, Marko Berger, and their two children, Annika and Daniel Berger. The elder Bergers are extremely resentful of the trip to Africa and they send Marko a letter disowning him. Ladivine Rivière and Marko are relieved to not be vacationing with Marko's family, as Ladivine Rivière and Marko would drink to severe excess when with the Bergers and feel great shame about how Annika and Daniel might perceive them. We are privy to some memories from Ladivine Rivière's childhood, as she processes her thoughts about Freddy Moliger's murder trial. Ladivine Rivière is resentful of her childhood. She is not extremely close with Clarisse during adulthood and only occasionally talks with her father on the phone. She spent part of her teenage years having sex with older men for money and is bothered that this did not trouble her parents, who were aware and indifferent (similar to Ladivine Sylla's quiet acceptance of Clarisse dropping out of school). Ladivine Rivière does not know about the existence of Ladivine Sylla and is unaware that she and her mother are biracial.

While on vacation in what is possibly the native country of Ladivine Sylla, Ladivine Rivière experiences a series of odd events. She is (mis)recognized by locals, who believe to have seen her at a wedding she did not attend. She is followed by a strange dog, presumed to be Clarisse Rivière. Her luggage goes missing, but her clothes reappear worn by locals. Her family meets a teenager named Wellington outside a museum, and he offers them a tour. Wellington later surprises the couple at their hotel and Marko pushes Wellington from their balcony. Wellington seems to die but reappears at the home of Richard Rivière's French acquaintances. The narrative of their trip ends abruptly and strangely, with Marko and the children returning to Germany without Ladivine Rivière after she disappears into a forest.

The narrative shifts to Annika's perspective in Berlin. Marko obsessively searches the internet for Ladivine Rivière, and Annika has taken on much of the responsibility for the family. A dog begins trailing Annika, who resents her mother for leaving her father in such distress. Another narrative shift brings us to the perspective of Richard Rivière, as he loses a significant amount of money to a fraudulent car sale. He resents his unmotivated and unemployed stepson and misses his first wife, Clarisse Rivière. A last narrative shift to a final brief section with Ladivine Sylla closes the novel, as she meets Richard Rivière.

II. Critical Reception

Ladivine served as a significant *rentrée littéraire* following the Goncourt and its related controversy, with *L'Express* describing it as "un retour réussi." Jordan Stump's translation of *Ladivine* (published in 2016 by Knopf) was shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker International Prize as well as the 2018 Dublin Literary Prize, and reviews of *Ladivine* were quite positive in both American and French media. NPR noted "this is one journey even non-Francophiles will find engrossing" (Zimmerman) and *Publishers Weekly* called it a "beautifully crafted, relentless

novel." The *NY Times* described it as "a work of immense power and mystery" with a "perfect ending" (McGrath). In French media, *L'Express* noted its "écriture riche et puissante," with "des phrases magnifiques à lire et relire" (Chavrier). The review in *Le Monde* was less positive, proposing that the book doesn't find its center until the second half and the work is overall disappointing (Georgesco).

Academic responses to *Ladivine* are likewise quite positive: Andrew Asibong, for example, called it a "svelte return to artistic form" whose "assured and baroque brilliance does make the fêted triptych predecessor [*Trois femmes puissantes*] look somewhat raggedy in comparison" (Asibong 100). *World Literature Today* described it as NDiaye's most complex plot yet, and praised its style: "NDiaye's manner of writing has often been compared to Proust's, with long sentences and much use of the imperfect subjunctive that many modern writers avoid. Here she has created a world of mystery, dream, and sensuality in a very controlled style" (King). *The French Review*'s assessment of *Ladivine* contrasts with that of *Le Monde*, proposing it is in fact the second half of the book that is a bit unwieldly: "Although occasionally long, especially in the latter half book as similar questions and uncertainties accumulate, as well as stylistically with characters frequently contemplating several hypothetical options simul the novel is captivating. *Ladivine* offers an accessible and deeply fascinating into the mysterious, supernatural world of NDiaye" (Hertich).

The comparisons to *Trois femmes puissantes* are apt, as *Ladivine* mirrors certain structural elements and narrative choices of its predecessor. *Ladivine* is also set in France and Africa (or what is probably Africa as we will see, the locations are suggested but not named), as well as Berlin (a short poem-prose story, *Y penser sans cesse* [2011] published in between *Trois femmes puissantes* and *Ladivine*, also takes place in Germany). Both books depict geographic and class

migration using third-person narration and multiple character focuses. We follow the lives of Ladivine Sylla; her daughter, Clarisse (née Malinka) Rivière; Clarisse's daughter, Ladivine Rivière; Annika Berger, daughter of Ladivine Rivière; and Richard Rivière, Clarisse's ex-husband. Like *Trois femmes puissantes*, *Ladivine* focuses on the perspective of its female characters and gives just one section to a male perspective (Richard in *Ladivine* and Rudy in *Trois femmes puissantes*). The narration, written from the perspective of a specific character but not necessarily in their voice, switches seamlessly between these different focuses. Like *Trois femmes puissantes*, *Ladivine* depicts an (im)migrant experience, single parenting, family abandonment, and masculine violence. However, *Ladivine* is less immediately political than *Trois femmes puissantes*, showing the intimate family and psychological violence without a correlating political crisis that readers might also see in the news, such as in the case of Khady's failed immigration to France with the important caveat, of course, that the personal *is* political, and the racial and gendered stigmas suffered by the characters of *Ladivine* are not independent of politics.

III. A Note on Names and Settings

While the narration does specify various French and other European locales (such as Bordeaux, Annecy, Warnemunde, and Berlin), Ladivine Sylla's non-European origins are never named, and neither is the country where Ladivine Rivière vacations (it is a "pays inconnu" and "pays étrange"). Nor does the narration name the city where Clarisse grew up: of this time, "Clarisse Rivière avait oublié le nom de la ville où elle avait grandi de même qu'elle avait publié presque tout ce qui se rapportait à la vie de cette fille prénommée Malinka. Elle se rappelait simplement que c'était en région parisienne…" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 25).

Ladivine Sylla's name reflects transnational identity and colonial memory, with Ladivine meaning "the divine" and possibly related to the more common Ludivine. The powerlessness of Ladivine is suggested by potential reference to Saint Ludwina (a variation of Ludivine), the patron Saint of chronic illness and pain. Ladivine also references Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and we will discuss the manifestation of this (notably Hell and Cerberus) in the context of metamorphosis. Syla might refer to *sila* (Encyclopedia Britannica), an Arabic word referring to shapeshifters that often appear in the form of a seductive woman or as hybrid human-animal figures. Similar to "femme-poisson" and Marie NDiaye's own name, *la divine sila* combines two cultural identities. Also like the femme-poisson, *sila* suggests a distrust of feminine seduction, though it is not the Sylla women who hold the power in their relationships, just as the femme-poisson is not truly a siren. Malinka is a bit more difficult to parse: Malinka is an uncommon Hungarian or Polish name and might here be a combination of *mal* and Linka, with Linka being a variation on both Caroline (meaning a free, strong woman) and Linda (meaning beautiful). It might also reference the Malinke people of West Africa. Clarisse originates from the Latin *clarus*, meaning clear and bright, alluding to whiteness. Clarisse likewise has an associated saint: Clare of Assisi, who founded the Order of Poor Ladies, also known as "the Clarisses." With *mal/malin* placed before, Malinka is pre-*clarus*, pre-whiteness unbeautiful and unfree.

The femininity of Sylla/sila is contrasted by Richard's last name of Rivière, as *sila* shapeshifters appear in the desert. Richard is a very common name signifying strength and power. We also have Berger, which means mountain dweller in a German context ("berg" meaning mountain), an escape from both the *rivière* and the desert; in the French context, Berger can also mean sheepherder. There will be a reference to sheepherders in the last section, during which Ladivine Sylla's face is described as a "figure ancienne de bergère en porcelaine"

(*Ladivine*, 401). Ladivine Rivière notably does not take Marko's name, though her children are both Bergers, and her story ends with transformation (*sila*). Marko (associated with Mars) alludes to war and violence, highlighting Marko's proximity to violence: the violent paintings in the museum, the murder of Wellington, and his parent's vacation home in Lüneburg, Germany, a town with heavy connections to Nazi Germany. Freddy Moliger's name is also partly German, meaning peace and power. There is also a saint: Saint Frederick of the Netherlands, who was murdered (juxtaposing Freddy, who will be the murderer). The Bible describes saints as a "great cloud of witnesses," and perhaps this manifests in *Ladivine* as characters who have knowledge of the identities they are perceiving: Ladivine Sylla (Ludwina) and, eventually, Freddy (Frederick) are the only two individuals who know Clarisse beyond her "passing." There are also religious elements to the text, which we will discuss in the section on transformations. Moliger as a last name might allude to another German name, Oliger. The German names connect Freddy to Germany and create a parallel between Clarisse/Freddy (peace, power) and Ladivine/Marko (war). There is also a saintly correlation between Freddy, Clarisse, and Ladivine: the patron saints of deafness, eye disease, and chronic illness, signifying persistent discomfort or illness in the body and an unwillingness to perceive what is occurring.

Then we have the Berger children: African variations of Annika mean sweet or docile face, while the German variation means gracious or favored (and though not directly pertinent to *Ladivine*'s geography, Annika can refer to soldier in Sanskrit variations, which is interesting alongside Mar-s-ko, god of war, and Annika's adoption of the family responsibilities upon her mother's disappearance). There is also potentially a connection between the rhyming Anni*ka* and Malin*ka*, given the previous double use of Ladivine, which connects Annika to the grandmother she does not know. The French name Annick signifies grace, with the word *malin*

signifying maliciousness. Daniel is a name of Hebrew origin meaning "god is my judge." We might also consider *The Book of Daniel*, in which God saves Daniel from persecution and blesses him with the ability to interpret dreams. In this sense, Daniel might potentially be able to eventually see visions (his mother the dog) like the women members of his family, and Annika has a face and that does not change into a dog over the course of the novel, Annika and Daniel's names suggest (but do not confirm) they could be the end to their family's turmoil. Additionally, there are many name changes in the Bible, including of Daniel's name (changed Belteshazzar by the king of Babylon). In Daniel 5:12, the queen of Babylon refers to "Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar." The name Daniel thus alludes to assimilation and suggests Daniel can inhabit his born identity.[36]

The surname Wellington has a long Anglo-Saxon history and Wellington speaks English with the Rivière and Berger family and wears an NBA jersey, signifying the multi-national nature of the colonization of Africa as well as American hegemony. The combination of western and non-western names highlights the complex and sometimes unknown and conflicted heritage of these characters and their inherited cultural hybridity.

IV. Fictions de filiation: Inheritance, Family, and Motherhood

We can consider *Ladivine* a *récit de filiation*, a term first used by Dominique Viart in 1999 to describe works that seek answers in the face of lost familial heritage. In the *récit de filiation,* the author/protagonist confronts lost memories so as to understand the past, which has

[36] Names were changed for assimilation or by God to reflect a new purpose and identity. From Revelation 2:17: "To Everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows but the one who receives it," the white stone reflecting innocence (after being tried and judged worthy of ascension) and the hidden manna being a symbol of Jesus and strength derived from believing. Clarisse changes her name to assimilate into her conception of Frenchness and she chooses a name that reflects whiteness.

informed their present despite being unknown. The *récit de filiation* attempts to "exhumer les vestiges d'un héritage en miettes et raccommoder les lambeaux de sa mémoire déchirée" (Demanze 9). The *récit de filiation* confronts "un individu esseulé entre un passé qui n'est plus et un avenir qui tarde à venir" (9), and NDiaye's approach shows that the "passé qui n'est plus" has associations with universalist erasure of individual identity, asking what is left when the personal and collective are lost. *Ladivine* depicts a search for a defiant heritage that persists despite communal and personal attempts to erase it. The goal of the search is not necessarily genealogy but connections that are only achievable through recognition and knowledge of the self, which will prove impossible for Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière, who do not know the life story of Ladivine Sylla. *Ladivine* does not fit the exact description of a *récit de filiation*, as it is not explicitly autobiographical, but we will discuss certain autobiographical elements that reinforce a reading of Ladivine as a *récit de filiation*. We might also refer to *Ladivine* as a *fiction de filiation*, in which the author attempts to "exhumer les vestiges d'un héritage" through the creation of memories, an act of fictionalizing that can invent history and identities by embracing the *fragilité psychologique* and mirroring the playacting of the characters.

Clarisse's self-effacement is self-constructed/-inflicted — the result of rejecting a mother whose very existence prevents her from belonging to the middle-class white French milieu of her classmates. Yet Ladivine Sylla has also erased herself, and just as Ladivine Rivière will take on the ghosts of her mother Clarisse, Clarisse Rivière is replicating the ghosts of Ladivine Sylla and the information Ladivine Sylla has withheld (her family history) or is unable to share (Clarisse's father). Ladivine Sylla is not given much agency, personality, or narrative space in the book, but given Clarisse's tepid reaction to her divorce and Ladivine Rivière's subdued reaction to her mother's death, it is possible Ladivine Sylla maintains the belief that Clarisse's

father is kind, prosperous, and will return to her simply because it is more tolerable to suppress the overwhelming hurt than it is to acknowledge it. It is also possible she is aware he will never return and is trying to protect her daughter from feeling abandoned. In her narrative focus, Ladivine Sylla grieves having no one in the world but her daughter and there is no mention of Clarisse's father.

Clarisse and her mother live in a very small apartment, and when Clarisse complains about its size, Ladivine Sylla says they cannot move as Clarisse's father would not know their new address. Ladivine Sylla has no acquaintances outside of her daughter and employers. She is liked by the women who employ her, but Clarisse has a sense that there are others who do not treat her well because they do not really know her. Believing Ladivine Sylla to be well-treated after she is *known* implies she is initially not well-treated as she is *perceived*, and that her kind and unassuming personality counter racist judgments made about her, as a Black woman and immigrant. Clarisse's perception of her mother is the opposite: she does know and appreciate Ladivine Sylla, but does not accept her because of her fears of how others will perceive her mother, a sort of meta-stigmatizing of her mother.

In relocating, changing her name, and channeling whiteness, Clarisse seeks the social identity of the father her mother so deeply reveres and to escape the way her mother is forced to navigate the world. When Clarisse leaves their family apartment, she ensures her father cannot find her she cannot be left behind if she is no longer there, similar to how characters will later choose escape by transforming into dogs. *Ladivine* depicts the ways ancestry will overwhelm the inheritor should they not be able to understand or communicate it.[37] Clarisse

[37] This is similar to the eruption of the femme-poisson's song, of which she has no control or firm understanding and which endangers her. Clarisse will also be endangered by her relationship to her roots but cannot successfully suppress her history. Themes of rebirth are also shared: the femme-poisson

Rivière and Ladivine Rivière have only ever known their mothers *as mothers*. As we will later discuss, by presenting a story spanning generations and using a narrator that is interior to but separate from the protagonists, the reader can experience Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière as daughters and mothers and as mothers of daughters, a perspective neither character would be able to wholly depict or understand should the narrative have been written in the first-person. Motherhood is a space of metamorphosis (carrying the child), rebirth (a second life and identity as a mother), and potential for immortality (giving birth to new generations).

A. Mothers, Daughters, and Inherited Grief

In *Mothers Voicing Mothering?: The Representation of Motherhood in the Novels and Short Stories of Marie NDiaye*, Pauline Eaton writes that "it is quite explicitly suggested that the love of a father for his daughter may be a less complex affair than that of a mother for her daughter. […] Mothers [generally not explicitly NDiaye's mothers] might be struggling to conform to a norm that they have had little or no part in forming, and which they are unable to influence for change, because of the power of the maternal archetype and the degree to which they have internalized such cultural norms" (Eaton 238). The women of *Ladivine* are also conforming to cultural norms that differ due to nationality and geography. We are not privy to this process as it relates to Ladivine Sylla, but Clarisse's rejection of her mother and explicit wish to conform to Frenchness suggests Ladivine Sylla remains outside of the norms of class, race, and (nuclear) family as deemed acceptable by her daughter (i.e. how Clarisse views herself in relation to her peers and the women who employ her mother). Absence and/or abandonment is itself a type of presence and it will be impossible for Clarisse Rivière to completely disappear.

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emerges from the water unsure of her surroundings and sense of self, and the origins of the Sylla line are never defined.

Clarisse (re)becomes Malinka when in proximity to her mother. At the beginning of the novel and before the reader is even fully acquainted with each identity, "Elle redevenait Malinka à peine montée dans le train et ce ne lui était ni un plaisir ni un désagrément [...]. Mais elle le savait car elle ne pouvait plus alors répondre spontanément au prénom de Clarisse lorsqu'il arrivait [...]. C'est à cela, à sa propre incapacité de répondre au prénom de Clarisse, qu'elle avait compris qu'elle était Malinka dès qu'elle montait dans le train de Bordeaux" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 9). Riding the train to Bordeaux to visit Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse is overcome by her discarded identity, a change over which she has no real control but of which she is aware, understanding that she is now Malinka, but not *choosing* to be Malinka. The narration switches between Clarisse and Malinka throughout this entire first section, sometimes in the same paragraph:

> Chaque premier mardi du mois *la mère de Malinka* recevait assez d'argent pour faire ses courses jusqu'à la prochaine visite, ainsi qu'un petit cadeau [...] car elle aimait passionnément les objets et les surprises et que *Clarisse Rivière*, qui s'embêtait beaucoup à trouver tout cela, ne pouvait se résoudre à ne lui apporter qu'une sèche enveloppe de billets. *Elles* s'attablaient ensuite dans la minuscule cuisine et mangeaient ce que *sa mère* avait préparé la veuille [...] et seule *sa mère* parlait de ce qu'elle avait fait durant ce mois et des quelques personnes qu'elle avait rencontrées au club de vieilles dames du quartier, et cela ne pesait plus entre elles, que *Clarisse Rivière* ne pût rien dire de sa vie et que sa mère ne pût rien lui demander.
> Il y avait eu un temps où, son propre récit fini, *la mère de Malinka* restait un peu hagarde, bouche entrouverte, et fixait d'un œil éploré et suppliant et cependant sans espoir, résigné, *le visage de Clarisse Rivière* qui devenait alors si froid, si dur que *sa mère* baissait les yeux.
> Alors un silence dense, douloureux tombait entre *elles*, jusqu'à ce que *la mère de Malinka* reprît une histoire, n'importe laquelle, une insignifiance déjà racontée, et que *le visage de Clarisse Rivière* redevînt peu à peu ce qu'il était, le beau visage doux, tendre, lointain que *la mère de Malinka* connaissait et aimait et dont les traits étaient pareils aux siens. (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 19) (Italics my own)

The oscillating identities in this passage have two contrasting effects: "le visage de Clarisse Rivière" alongside "sa mère" implies we are witnessing Malinka, yet "la mère de Malinka" (as opposed to Ladivine Sylla or "la mère de Clarisse Rivière," as she is also referred to in relation to Clarisse, implies that Ladivine Sylla sees herself as *Malinka's* mother, not *Clarisse's* mother.

She does not know Malinka as Clarisse Rivière and so must draw on memories of her daughter as a child during their current interaction, which has an effect on Clarisse's perception/construction of herself. "La mère de Malinka" has "traits pareils aux siens" and her face is "beau, doux, tendre, lointain" whereas Clarisse's face is "si froid, si dur." We are encountering conflicting identities of the two women in this passage and the effect of these different identities on their perceivable personalities and on their capacity to connect. Ladivine Sylla can better connect with Malinka than with Clarisse, the latter name being a rejection of the mother and a suppression of the daughter. This also highlights the importance Clarisse places on perception in her own understanding of identity (which we might also consider to be relevant to NDiaye's perception and presentation of her own identity): Ladivine Sylla cannot perceive of Clarisse *as* Clarisse for multiple interdependent reasons. Clarisse has not shared this vision of herself with Ladivine Sylla, and Clarisse does not view Ladivine Sylla as sophisticated enough to exist in the French space Clarisse now occupies. Thus, adjacent to Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse rebecomes Malinka, the identity perceived by her mother, meaning the self is never independent of family or social order. Identity is created by the viewer — not the subject.

The name changes are quite destabilizing for the reader, as they occur regularly and without real pattern throughout the first section. This destabilization underscores the fluidity of identity and requires the reader to constantly reevaluate their interpretation of the text and the focus character. To the reader, Clarisse and Malinka are the same character and the narrative voice is tonally consistent; to Clarisse herself and to the people around her, the name matters a great deal, as it modifies her family history and outward appearance, making identity a collective construct (in this instance, a non-French name and visual markers that are contextual) and not

an objective fact. We see: (1) Ladivine Sylla as she perceives her daughter, (2) Clarisse as she perceives herself when she is being perceived by her mother, and (3) Ladivine Sylla as she perceives herself when she is with her "new" daughter as opposed to (4) Ladivine Sylla who remembers Malinka. This linguistic back-and-forth (*sa* mère, la mère *de Malinka*, le visage *de Clarisse*) creates a divide between Malinka Sylla and Clarisse Rivière, and suggests the divide is artificial. Clarisse is all of these identities at once and it is not actually possible for Clarisse to erase Malinka. The "elles" throughout this passage (and in other places, where it is consistently an ambiguous pronoun) might refer to any number of women, allowing the narrative to encapsulate all of these identities in a singular moment.

It is difficult to specify the origins of the distance, shame, and tension between Ladivine Sylla and Clarisse because Ladivine Sylla's story is not expansive. Clarisse's narration is lacking in description and information about her mother, with the focus consistently on how she interprets perception of mother by others, such as her classmates and Ladivine Sylla's employers. In this sense, can also read an unspoken judgment in Clarisse's understanding of her father and mother. All Clarisse knows of her father is that he abandoned Ladivine Sylla; knowing how much stock Clarisse gives to outside opinions of her mother, it is likely her father's rejection of Ladivine Sylla contributes to Clarisse's shame of her mother, as well as her pity. Ladivine Sylla never gives up on waiting for the father, and so when Clarisse abandons Ladivine Sylla, she is aware of the hurt she is causing and knows that Ladivine Sylla will wait for her forever. As Clarisse's perception of herself changes based on who is witnessing her (*Malinka* to her mother, *Clarisse* to her husband), her perception of her mother is rooted in how Ladivine Sylla is treated by society. Ladivine Sylla does not discuss her own origins and her personality and thoughts are hardly elaborated on. We know only her profession, that she is described as

a "négresse" by the narrator (interior to Clarisse Rivière), that she has no siblings, and that she loves her daughter. The birth of Clarisse erased the person Ladivine Sylla was as she became wholly defined by her daughter. And because Clarisse does not include Ladivine Sylla in her life, Ladivine Sylla's "rebirth" as a mother is temporary and tenuous.

When Clarisse eventually marries Richard Rivière, she *seems* to have found what should afford her belonging: whiteness, Frenchness, and the middle-class nuclear family she did not have as a child. Yet the familial absence she suffered is only replicated in her daughter, her in-laws reject her, and her husband divorces her. Just as Ladivine Sylla did not reveal her family to Clarisse, Clarisse does not reveal Ladivine Sylla to Ladivine Rivière. This will be replicated for Annika: Annika loses her corporeal mother (like Ladivine Rivière loses Clarisse), loses her father to internet searches (like Clarisse did not have a father and Ladivine Rivière's parents divorced), and rejects her grandfather's phone call (like Clarisse did not have grandparents). Ladivine Rivière and Annika's stories show the longevity and cyclical nature of these reinventions of identity, and the perpetual nature of these reinventions because the identities have no foundation (for example, Clarisse's divorce affecting her capacity to continue existing as Clarisse).

The entanglements reveal an insurmountable difficulty both in being a daughter and in being a mother. Clarisse is overjoyed at the birth of Ladivine Rivière (calling her "ce merveilleux bébé") because the child serves as proof at her success in creating a family. She is also overwhelmed, feeling love so great that "il lui arrivait de penser que cet immense amour pour l'enfant l'encombrait et qu'elle eût préféré s'en passer" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 77). Some of the language used to describe the emotions associated with motherhood suggest postpartum depression, though the condition is never named. The narration refers to

"[l']existence l'inquiétante figure de la mélancolie" (216). There are other hints at postpartum depression throughout NDiaye's works: the protagonist of *La Cheffe*, possibly Norah in *Trois femmes puissantes*, multiple women in *Autoportrait en vert* (and it is possible the ghostly *women en vert* personify depression or anxiety), almost certainly Rosie in *Rosie Carpe* among other examples. Pauline Eaton's interpretation of this theme in NDiaye's works suggests it is not so bleak as it appears, and that the "moments of maternal ecstasy [...] should be read as being equally representative of the mother's experience of mothering as the more sustained narrative of its bleakness, loneliness and abusiveness" (Eaton 230). Yet the reluctance to name the illness makes it untreatable and the incapacity to address or recognize it creates a cycle of rejection that do largely overwhelm the moments of ecstasy.

There is something rather telling about giving equal importance to both sensations but not equal narrative space. These joyous moments are accompanied by awareness that they are temporary and a fear about what could befall the child. The mothers are afraid for their daughters because they cannot prevent their daughters from being overwhelmed by the despair they themselves feel. By contrast, Richard Rivière cares for the child, but "Nul amour disproportionné ne tentait de le mettre à l'épreuve, de le priver de quoi que ce fût ni de faire exploser sa poitrine" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 78) Clarisse feels a deep shame and guilt over having rejected her mother, and Ladivine Rivière feels a guilt over wanting to escape her children. Ladivine Rivière will later gain an understanding of her mother's overwhelming affection upon seeing Clarisse's interactions with Ladivine Rivière's own children, but as a child, Ladivine Rivière perceived this possible postpartum depression as neutrality or as neglect.

In addition to the guilt and shame disproportionally felt by the women characters, they have a heightened sense of obligation, resulting in an infantilization of men characters and an

adultification of women characters (ex. Annika taking care of her father and brother upon the disappearance of Ladivine Rivière). Clarisse Rivière and Ladivine Rivière become, at times, "mothers" to the romantic partners in their lives, and Annika takes on a mothering role with her father and brother. The instances of men as sons or "ce garçon" often occur in emotionally charged situations, such as during/after sex or during the murder of Clarisse. However, the men Clarisse has sex with as a teenager are consistently referred to as men. Richard is also referred to as "cet homme," Richard Rivière, and as Clarisse's husband. Marko is not referred to as "ce garçon" in relation to his daughter Annika, but Annika herself takes on adult responsibilities, thus infantilizing Marko: "si jeune qu'elle fût et consciente de sa jeunesse, de son ignorance, que leur mère se fût lassée d'eux, les enfants, de leur vigueur et de leurs exigences, de leur société inévitable, quotidienne, de leurs humeurs et de leurs bavardages. Elle-même, Annika, était souvent fatiguée de la compagnie de Daniel. Elle se sentait pour une large part responsable de son frère" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 332-333). The narrative continues to note Annika cannot forgive "*leur mère* d'avoir laissé *Marko* dans un tel état de détresse" (333) (italics my own). Ladivine Rivière — now existing only in Annika's memory and imagination — is still referred to as Annika's mother (more specifically, *their* mother, which could include Marko given the mothering elements of these romantic relationships), while her father is referred to by his first name Marko rather than "leur père."

During a narrative scene in which Ladivine Rivière expresses deep doubt about her connection to motherhood: "elle se devait de s'y plier sans peur ni vains regrets, puisque rien n'avait contrainte ni de se marier ni de procréer. […] elle avait parfois honte de sa fatigue et de son effroi, qu'elle avait en quelque sorte choisis — et dans la somme incalculable des sources possible de fatigue et d'effroi, l'homme aimable et les enfants délicieux n'étaient-ils pas ce qu'il

y avait de moins éprouvant ?" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 216). Ladivine Rivière wonders why she should need to go to her mother's trial and confront her mother's murderer. Clarisse Rivière is consistently present in her thoughts, and the narrative describes Clarisse's relationship with Ladivine Rivière's children as well, which is interconnected with Ladivine Rivière's relationship with her own children:

> Elle éprouvait pourtant le désir de se dérober parfois, moins disparaître que de s'abstraire tout en ne provoquant surtout de souffrances pour personne.
> […] Elle rendit alors à son visage la bonne expression d'assurance et de gaieté qui seule rassurait pleinement les enfants, elle fit un clin d'œil à Daniel et les traits du petit se détendirent, lui rappelant à quel point Clarisse Rivière avait aimé cet enfant, non pas davantage qu'elle avait aimé Annika […] mais de manière plus sereine car l'amour passionné envers un petit garçon ne lui rappelait rien alors que, avait-elle confié un jour à Ladivine, à la naissance de celle-ci sa joie et son exaltation avaient été si intentes qu'elle n'avait pu les contenir […] et elle était entrée en dépression.
> Elle se reprochait encore, trente ans plus tard, d'avoir montré à Ladivine dans ses premières semaines d'existence l'inquiétante figure de la mélancolie. (216)

The desire to "se dérober" suggests Clarisse Rivière's natural mode is one of suppression, hiding her emotional state and needs as well as her identity. Ladivine wishes to disappear in such a way that her family will not feel what she is currently experiencing after her own mother's death. Yet we know this is impossible: Clarisse never knew her father and had no true hope of meeting him, despite her mother's persistent hope he would appear; Clarisse abandons her mother and comes to feel great shame about their lost relationship.

B. Fathers, Sons, and Inherited Violence

The maternal and paternal relationships in *Ladivine* are characteristic of NDiaye's broader work[38] in which parental and intergenerational relationships are quite fraught and the capacity for empathy is gendered. In *Ladivine*, we have (1) Richard Rivière, who divorces Clarisse

[38] This is indeed true of all the women in *Trois femmes puissantes*. Only Khady has what can be described as a loving relationship with her husband, and they are unable to have a child and he dies.

Rivière and replaces her with a French white equivalent but who misses his first wife and feels a pull between "le respect qu'il devait à ce visage" and the "désir violent" to erase it so that the other (his first wife) may survive; (2) Freddy Moliger, who violently murders Clarisse Rivière; (3) Marko Berger, who is kind but possesses a "miserable, guilty conscience" and pushes Wellington off a balcony to the boy's death; (4) Daniel, who slaps his mother without cause; (5) Richard's stepson, who has failed his *baccalauréat* twice, is unemployed, wears a t-shirt that reads "*fuck you, you fucking fuck*" (in English) and has recently been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes (problematically implied in Richard's point of view to be a moral failing); (6) the abandonment of Ladivine Rivière by Richard, who does not attend his daughter's wedding and does not meet her children; (7) Richard Rivière's father, who was abusive to Richard; (8) Freddy Moliger's deceased father, who was likewise abusive to his son; and finally, (9) Clarisse Rivière's father, who abandoned Ladivine Sylla and Clarisse before the latter could know him. Again, the identities change in relation to another person and with the fact of being perceive, with the women characters inhabiting a motherhood in relation to their partners.

The European men are universally physically and/or emotionally violent and there is only one instance of violence potentially inflicted by a woman character. Richard Rivière's mother believes her husband was eaten by their pet dog, though the official cause is a heart attack preceding being eaten by the dog. The dog is different than the dog that previously visited when Ladivine Rivière was a baby, and who was described as possessing the same eyes as Ladivine Sylla, but it is "la même race" as their first dog: "ils se ressemblait tellement qu'on oubliait que ce n'était pas celui d'avant. D'ailleurs ton père l'avait appelé pareil" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 102). French allows for this double meaning of "race," a term avoided when speaking about people but which holds an outdated and pejorative definition pertaining to

"catégorisation de l'espèce humain"[39]; this varies from its use in English, where the word "race" is used in relation people, and is translated by Jordan Stump as "breed." Given the antagonism of Richard's mother towards Clarisse, we can presume her linguistic tendencies are outdated with potential to offend and the double entendre is intentional.

Clarisse's murder is also rooted in secrets: Freddy kills Clarisse because she receives a present from her daughter and he didn't know it was her birthday.[40] In a fit of "puérile colère" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 131), Freddy accuses Clarisse of valuing her daughter more than she values him. And during this violent episode, Clarisse recognizes "son enfant ou l'enfant qu'il avait été mais il lui parut, à cet instant, être le sien. Une grande tendresse se répandit en elle" (131). Freddy briefly transforms from Clarisse's jealous lover to her child in a demonstration of the relationship between women and sons and between sons and violence, as well as of Clarisse's capacity for empathy, and the tendency to connect empathy with childhood innocence. After the murder, Ladivine Rivière will avoid learning more about Freddy and the trial, because to find out his actions are linked to a traumatic childhood would cause her to feel pity for him:

> Pourquoi la fille unique de cette femme, Ladivine Rivière, devrait-elle prendre le risque d'entendre le bourreau de sa mère évoquer les dernière minutes de celle-ci ?
> Pourquoi endurer cela en plus de tout ce qu'elle avait déjà enduré ? […]
> Elle ne voulait rien apprendre non plus de l'enfance douloureuse de cet homme, de ce qui, lui avait dit Richard Rivière impressionné et presque touché malgré lui par tant

[39] From *Larousse*: "1. Population animale résultant, par sélection, de la subdivision d'une même espèce et possédant un certain nombre de caractères communs transmissibles d'une génération à la suivante. 2. Ancienne catégorisation de l'espèce humaine selon des critères morphologiques ou culturels, sans aucune base scientifique et dont l'emploi est au fondement des divers racismes et de leurs pratiques. (Face à la diversité humaine, une classification sur les critères les plus immédiatement apparents [couleur de la peau surtout] a été mise en place et a prévalu tout au long du XIXe siècle. Les progrès de la génétique conduisent aujourd'hui à rejeter toute tentative de classification raciale chez les êtres humains.)"

[40] The cardigan is contrasted by the yellow dress that Ladivine Rivière brings on vacation and which is amongst the clothes that suspiciously disappear and reappear. Ladivine Rivière purchases this dress with her mother at the Galeries Lafayette because Clarisse likes the dress. The yellow dress is worn by the local resident who resembles her, and this likeness solidifies her and Clarisse's connection to the unnamed foreign country.

> d'échecs et de sordides malheurs, l'avait conduit inéluctablement, dirait-on sans doute au procès, vers la tyrannie et l'assassinat. (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 217)

The complex perception of the men characters is untenable for the women characters because it hurts them to feel pity and/or empathy warmth for the people who have hurt them: "Comment ne pas éprouver, pour tous les enfants suppliciés devenus des hommes perdus, de la peine et de la pitié?" (217). To feel sympathy for herself, she must create distance to her present self and moment, by viewing herself as a child: "la fille unique de cette femme." In men, childhood trauma/violence will manifest in adulthood as more violence; in women, it will manifest as disappearance. The implication that children warrant empathy because they are innocent is often demonstrated by perceiving the guilty character briefly as a child, but there are certain instances where women characters remain innocent in adulthood. The word is also used regularly in relation to Clarisse Rivière, who exists in a perpetual state of innocence, having self-constructed her adulthood while she was still a child (and who will rebecome a child when she transforms into a dog and returns to her mother as "sa fille").

Adult women characters perceiving their partners with boyhood/childhood innocence also occurs upon Clarisse's first encounter with Richard Rivière. Richard brings Clarisse to his apartment in Langon, and they look at each other, "amusés et fiers et se contemplant eux-mêmes dans une distance unie, comme des parents émus par le comportement de leurs enfants. Elle l'observait de côté, *ce garçon* à la chevelure noire et drue…" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 64) (italics my own). The narrative has previously used "un homme" to refer to an anonymous lover who preceded Richard, signifying seeing Richard as "un garcon" (though he is not younger than her) is meant to imply a more thoughtful perception of Richard than existed with the lover. During most of this section, Richard will be referred to as Richard Rivière and as her husband. The narration refers to him again with childlike association when Richard tells Clarisse he is going

to leave her:: they have sex a final time before he moves out, and "Elle pleurait sans s'en rendre compte et ses larmes coulaient entre leurs deux poitrines jointes, se mêlant à leur sueur également salée, entraînant à jamais toute tentation, tout effort de colère et la laissant tandis qu'elle s'agrippait pour quelques secondes encore à cet homme qui était *à la fois elle-même, son époux et son fils*, affreusement sèche et triste" (97) (italics my own). This is an instance of the conflicting empathy and warmth felt for men characters even as they cause women characters physical and/or psychological pain, engendering a maternal protectiveness. The reflects or reinforces traditional gender roles, and Clarisse's value to Richard as a mother and caretaker. She is caring for *him*, despite the hurt and abandonment being caused by Richard.

Clarisse does not feel the same pressure of performance with Freddy Moliger that she feels with Richard Rivière. She introduces herself to Freddy as Malinka, turning away from her previous life and family because Malinka had never had a husband, child, or boyfriend and no one remembers her but Ladivine Sylla, so she can now start over. Clarisse Rivière (now living as Malinka) does not have sex with Freddy Moliger until after he meets Ladivine Sylla. Yet Clarisse's return to Malinka does not erase her from the memories of Richard and Ladivine Rivière, nor does it erase them from Clarisse's memories. Clarisse is able to reveal herself to Freddy Moliger is because of his violent nature and what she perceives to be imperfections: "il l'initiait à la connaissance de ses propres secrets. Oh, ce n'était pas attrayant et il lui semblait parfois n'avoir plus de repos mais elle n'aurait pas échangé cette douleur déchirante contre la paix de sa vie d'avant, quand Richard Rivière vivait encore auprès d'elle" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 114). She could not reveal herself to Richard Rivière, as she needed to maintain her Frenchness (a lack of disclosure that began in lycée, upon calling her mother her "servante"). Clarisse refrains from judging others because she sees so much to judge within herself, most notably the fact

that "elle se rendait coupable d'un crime permanent vis-à-vis de la servante" (116). Freddy Moliger similarly subdues himself because he fears seeing "le terrible visage de sa colère" (131), his violence almost personified as its own person, separate from Freddy as he normally exists. Given other connections to *Peau noire, masques blancs* and the connection between Freddy's violence and the inferiority he projects onto Clarisse and Ladivine Sylla, we can quote Fanon's notion that between Black women and white men are doomed because love is not possible without freedom from inferiority. Fanon writes that "Le malheur et l'inhumanité du Blanc sont d'avoir tué l'homme quelque part" (Fanon 187): "le terrible visage de sa colère" ("visage blanc") ties Freddy's actions to whiteness and his dominance over Clarisse.

Again, the identities change in relation to another person and with the fact of being perceived. It is ultimately Clarisse's fear that causes Freddy to display his "terrible visage": "Elle se tourna vers lui et sut au même instant qu'elle avait commis une erreur car elle était consciente de la peur qui venait de s'allumer dans son propre regard" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 131). Clarisse is nervous not *because* of having felt this fear, but because she has revealed an emotion, endangering herself by allowing herself to be seen. Just before murdering her, Freddy takes Clarisse's photo and he "contrôlait l'image," framing the picture as Clarisse wonders if he can still see the fear on her face or if he can see a shadow of the fear, the manifestation of her fear mimicking the process of a camera obscura creating a permanent image. This photo directly preceding her death will trap her in a perpetual state of fearful innocence, as *Malinka* and not *Clarisse*. Her final recognition will also be as Malinka, as her mother sees her image on the cover of a newspaper and identifies her as "sa fille *Malinka*" (140).

C. Foreignness, Marriage, and Colonial Masculinity

There is a guilt not felt by Ladivine Rivière, but experienced by Marko, which emphasizes her connection to the unnamed country they travel to on vacation as well as his connection to violence. Marko — who has shown no previous sign of violent behavior, and whom Ladivine Rivière loves because of his soft nature — is the first to accept the tour, but grows increasingly uneasy with Wellington as the boy shows them gory paintings in the museum. The narrative tells us that "la conscience morale de celui-ci était si grande, et si anciennes, si bien ancrées sa prise en charge des plus terribles crimes et l'obéissance à un devoir de perfection" (238).

They move into another room of violent paintings, and Wellington describes the victims as his ancestors. Ladivine Rivière is not immune from the effects of colonial violence, being the granddaughter of a woman who immigrated and the daughter of a woman who hid her race to better fit into white society. Witnessing this colonial violence in a museum creates an initial impression that it is historical, but Wellington's interjections defy the finality to colonialism, demonstrating the close connections living people have to these events. In *La Naufragée*, we have a curated and edited (the details selected by NDiaye rather than entire paintings) exhibition and in *Ladivine* we have an invisible exhibition. Wellington's commentary and the fact of visiting a museum in the colonized nation is a reversal of western museum-going, in which (often stolen) African art is displayed in culturally powerful museum institutions, and if there *is* historical contextualization, it is created by the hegemonic power (i.e. catalogues written by and for the museum[41]).

[41] We can consider *Le Modèle noir* exhibition as an example of this, and the differences between the NYC exhibition and Paris exhibition, as discussed in the introduction. While the Musée d'Orsay framing is interesting and historically helpful, it is nevertheless commissioned by the museum, and the differences between two exhibitions of the same works demonstrates the inevitable history- and narrative-crafting of museum exhibitions. They are, of course, *curated*.

Marko wonders aloud to Ladivine if Wellington is trying to make them feel guilty; as for Ladivine Rivière: "le poison de culpabilité semblait l'avoir déjà, effectivement, atteint, ainsi qu'elle l'observa avec peine, avec agitation, elle-même intimement protégée" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 237). The narrative implies she is morally protected by her ancestral connections to Africa and that this protection that exists despite her unawareness and despite her French nationality. The difference between Ladivine Rivière and Marko's responses to the museum demonstrate that no one is immune to colonial violence — not even the aggressor. Marko's engagement with these artworks suggests he has likewise "inherited" an emotional *filiation*, despite not having personally participated in this specific colonial violence.[42] Wellington's physical descriptions are limited but in describing the victims in the painting as his ancestors, we can presume he is African. Wellington is the only non-white man in the novel that we know of, the other non-white male character being Daniel Berger, who is presumed to pass as white like his sister and mother.

Marko's violent nature is revealed when he pushes Wellington out of their hotel window, embodying the violent paintings seen in the museum. Wellington appears to die: his body is not there in the morning, merely a large shadow of blood. Ladivine Rivière weeps and wonders if her tears are for Wellington, for Clarisse, or for Marko, before her thoughts are interrupted by a barking dog. Annika, who developed a small crush on Wellington upon meeting him,

[42] We might also think of this section in connection with reactions to JMW Turner's *The Slave Ship*, and we can additionally compare the experience of reading this section describing a museum without included images to that of seeing Turner's paintings alongside NDiaye's text. Turner's paintings are less immediately and visibly violent than their actual subject matter and our perception of Turner's images is likely affected by the text in *La Naufragée*, especially for readers previously unacquainted with Turner's work (for example, is the water the Thames, or is it the Seine?). By contrast, the "image" of the artwork in *Ladivine* is not accompanied by visual aesthetic value and can only be interpreted as the image-in-text is perceived by the protagonists — similar to how the protagonists are identified as they are perceived by others.

enters the room and announces she had a dream about Wellington inviting the Berger-Rivière family to Annika's wedding. This occurs after Ladivine is mistaken by town residents for a guest at a local wedding. There is an implication that Annika could marry Wellington, perhaps influencing Marko's violent response when Wellington appears in their hotel. Additionally, there are supernatural qualities to Wellington, like the Sylla line: he appears in Annika's dream and reappears after his death, suggesting supernatural qualities are racialized as well as gendered.

The relationship between Ladivine Rivière and Marko Berger links the violence of Freddy, Richard Rivière's father, and Clarisse's psychological violence of abandonment to masculinity and to whiteness. Ladivine Rivière and Marko Berger have a more honest and functional relationship and there does not seem to be a risk for divorce, but Marko (and briefly Daniel) exhibit violent natures. We should also note potential links between violence and the erased or unknown self: Richard does not know Clarisse's identity, neither Marko nor Ladivine Rivière know about her connections to Africa, Freddy Moliger *does* know Clarisse as Malinka. Ladivine Rivière suffer both when they "pass" and when they do not, suggesting it is not a specific identity that causes their turmoil but the psychological damage of erasure (i.e. Richard does not divorce Clarisse because he learns she is not white – he divorces her because he perceives an unsurmountable emptiness in their relationship).

V. The Performance of "Passing"

As Ladivine Rivière moves to Germany to leave behind her French roots and Clarisse strives to abandon her maternal ancestry, *Ladivine* asks to what degree it is possible to truly "pass" as another identity. In *Mothers Voicing Mothering?*, Pauline Eaton describes this use of theatrical language in the meetings between Clarisse and Ladivine Sylla: "The two women adopt

a common language, that of the theatre. They perform together. The language of the narrative is imbued with references to acting. According to Clarisse, her mother always makes a point of appearing at the start of the visit 'comme la figure dramatique de la dignité à jamais outragée' [like the dramatic figure of permanently insulted dignity], and this for the benefit of both of them" (Eaton 194). At times, though it is not in the first-person, the narration often feels like an extended monologue, with the focus character posing questions to audience who cannot answer back, facilitating an engagement that is as participatory as it is alienating. Like the characters, who do not often speak to each other in the novel, the reader is party to the narrative challenges and excluded from their resolution.

We can also read *Ladivine* as a demonstration of Erving Goffman's theories of passing and of "the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (Goffman 42) the undisclosed information being Clarisse's biracialism. Erving Goffman proposes that people engage in certain behaviors when they know other people are watching ("front stage" behaviors), as they try to replicate what they perceive to be normal and desired by the individuals they are seeking to adapt to. Malinka's rebirth as Clarisse is rooted in a wish to be white and French like her classmates. Her desire for racial self-erasure originates in subtle ways her peers stigmatize her and her mother. For example, a classmate asks about Ladivine Sylla when Ladivine retrieves Clarisse from school, not knowing Clarisse is herself not white, and Clarisse responds that Ladivine is her servant.

These occurrences could often be classified as microaggressions: the student does not make an offensive remark to Clarisse but speaks with "une moue étonnée et dégoûtée." There is also certainly an overlap between poverty, adapting to the school system as a first-generation French youth, and race. When Ladivine Sylla tells Clarisse that her father must be somewhere,

and that he's surely found success and must even have a car, Clarisse seeks a place in a world that would ensure the monetary success her mother praises in her father, and to channel the presumed ethnicity that has gave her "de beaux cheveux châtains" and her "peau fraiche."

Clarisse cannot actually strive to belong to Ladivine Sylla's family because she knows nothing about them, with the limited information she has coming only from internet searches on Ladivine Sylla's presumed home country. Ladivine Sylla is described with the word "négresse" and it is the narrator of Clarisse's section (that is to say, the third-person manifestation of Clarisse's thoughts) who uses this word, meaning one of Clarisse's dominant perceptions of Ladivine Sylla is her Blackness, which she describes with pejorative language or connotations. This is quite uncommon for NDiaye's works, which typically require the reader to make assumptions about a character's race based on their nationality or minimal physical descriptions (such as we see in the descriptions of Clarisse's hair, which she has inherited from her French father. We also see this with regards to Marko, whose ethnicity and appearance are not described but who is implied to be white because he is German and because of his experience at the museum).

Ladivine Sylla's Blackness is visible and defined, contrasting the ambiguous passing of her daughter and the whiteness of her granddaughter. There is, however, an implication that Ladivine Rivière somewhat resembles Ladivine Sylla, reinforced by the Rivière parents giving their second dog the same name as its predecessor (the dog who had Ladivine Sylla's eyes) because it bore such a striking resemblance. Ladivine Rivière is very conscious of her frame, which is very different than that of her mother, and presumably that of her father, who criticizes his stepson for having a larger body. Clarisse Rivière is described as being slim and long-legged, while Ladivine Rivière's section very frequently describes her legs as the opposite: massive, like

tree trunks, doughy, short, and having thick ankles. Her hair — wavy and brown — also differs from her mother, and her eyes and nose don't quite fit her face: "sa bouche et son nez petits semblaient avoir été volés à quelqu'un d'autre et collés ironiquement sur sa large figure" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 185). As a youth, Ladivine Rivière is jealous of her mother and wishes she had a similar "silhouette déliée," "jambe filiforme," and "charme piquant à la Parisienne," but becomes resigned to her appearance in adulthood and her qualities which, as a child, she perceived to be a "déficience morale."

Clarisse Rivière sees herself [elle se trouvait] as "bonne femme et comedienne excessive comme sa mère"; she knows Ladivine Sylla "n'avoir pas toujours les gestes exacts sur la scène où sa fille l'avait forcée à monter" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 17). If Ladivine Sylla wishes to participate in Clarisse Rivière's life, she must inhabit a role. In *Mothers Voicing Mothering*, Pauline Eaton suggests that the mother-daughter theatre of Ladivine Sylla and Clarisse Rivière reflects a preference for mothering a child rather than an adult, and that Clarisse likewise prefers being an infant: Ladivine Sylla feeds Clarisse, they take strolls about the neighborhood the way a mother might walk with a stroller, and the narration refers to "la mère de," suggesting she is primarily a mother in this moment. This coincides with how these characters interact with men; as we will discuss, Clarisse Rivière and Ladivine Rivière also take on mothering roles in their romantic relationships. The theatre is thus a means of racial passing and a space for expressing and experiencing a care that is not reciprocal in their marriages.

The theatrical elements align with the performance of race as well as the conception of identity as is perceived/defined by another, as shown in the shifts between *Clarisse* and *Malinka*. Clarisse Rivière playacts an alternative life: she tells her peers that Ladivine Sylla is her servant, she is more well-dressed than their means would typically allow because her mother brings

clothes home from the families she cleans for, and she wears makeup to lighten the tone of her face. Ladivine Sylla calls Clarisse her "princesse" and Clarisse makes Ladivine Sylla into her servant, creating a sort of fantasy game. Clarisse's memories of her youth take on a cinematic quality, as if she is studying a photo or film: "De l'époque où elle se souvenait confusément, en noir et blanc et avec une impression de visages figés, comme d'un vieux film sans importance dont Malinka et sa mère n'auraient pas été les personnages principaux mais les deux faire-valoir d'une autre fille, d'une autre mère plus intéressantes" (25).

A. Frenchness and Race

In its treatment of the theme of racial performance and "passing," NDiaye's novel echoes the American "passing novel," though this does not carry an identical meaning in the French Republican context about and from which NDiaye writes, as national identity is privileged in the French context and race is meant to be uncounted and invisible. We might compare *Ladivine* to Nella Larsen's famous 1929 novel *Passing* (translated as *Passer la ligne*), which tells of two Black childhood friends from Harlem, one of whom is able to pass as white, such as is the case for Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière.[43] The *Chicago Tribune* review of *Ladivine* notes that "*Ladivine*, NDiaye's latest novel to be published here, might be called a 'passing novel' if it were American; in NDiaye's hands, it both is and isn't" (Gentry), and the review in *The New Inquiry* cites the *Chicago Tribune* and likewise discusses *Ladivine* as a passing novel. It is a passing novel in that Clarisse Rivière does successfully pass as white for most of the narrative, but neither she nor Ladivine Rivière consistently passes as white *and* French. This underscores the very immediate and ongoing colonial history of France and the nuance of passing as white when one

[43] NDiaye addresses this idea more directly in her 2008 short story "Les Sœurs," a story that loosely parallels *Passing* written as a preface to her brother Pap Ndiaye's nonfiction book *La Condition noire*.

has recent ties to immigration and is also bicultural, as well as the difference in historical treatments of race in the United States as opposed to France. As Laura Jensen notes,

> […] metropolitan France was never Jim Crow America; white skin was not officially a prerequisite for entry into certain spaces, for a quality public education, voting rights, legal protection, and equal opportunity under the law. So while the early twentieth-century American literary scene saw an explosion of passing narratives, Paris was seen as a sanctuary of racial tolerance. […] Passing in NDiaye's novels is therefore not about transgressing legal boundaries, but rather about reconciling two conflicting truths: first, that the French nation is legally blind to race, and second, that from the seventeenth through the twentieth century, France was an imperial power." ("Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France," Jensen 92 – 93).

Passing in a French context has different historical and literary precedence than in the United States, making it difficult to read this theme across national lines, because the nondisclosure of information is differently interpreted based upon the readers' and characters' contextual comparisons – that is to say, Clarisse Rivière is Black when she is with her mother but not visibly so when she is with her husband; *Ladivine* is a passing novel when it is read by an American audience that has Nella Larsen's novel at the forefront of their literary touchstones, but not necessarily so when it is read by a French audience, where nationality would be the desired passing identity.

The question of the French *vs* the American "passing novel" was discussed in a 2016 *Ladivine* roundtable between Amy Gentry, Aaron Bady, and Jeffrey Zuckerman, published in *The New Inquiry*. Amy Gentry proposes that Ladivine both is and isn't a passing novel: "in America, race and identity mean something very different than I think NDiaye means here, though not unrelated" and that the book is about race "but in a very different way than I think we are used to thinking about it in America" (Bady, Gentry, and Zuckerman). The difficulty in comparing racial politics and identity in France as opposed to racial politics in the United States, and the unquestionable presence of race in *Ladivine* accompanied by its opaque

depiction, is representative of the fact that in France, racial minorities are not represented by the government and "les Noirs de France sont individuellement visibles, mais ils sont invisibles en tant que groupe social et qu'objet d'étude pour les universitaires" (Pap Ndiaye 21).

Race is ever-present but never named, reflective of the official government position regarding race, in which "la catégorie 'noir' est donc d'abord une hétéro-identification s'appuyant sur la perception de saillances phénoménales variables dans le temps et l'espace" (Pap Ndiaye 25). We can also consider the attitude toward race in French social sciences: "le modèle républicain s'est construit sur une figure abstraite de la citoyenneté, théoriquement indifférente aux particularités de sexe, de couleur de peau ou autres, de telle sorte que la notion de 'race' fait figure d'épouvantail idéologique et politique" (40). By utilizing the third-person, the voice is theoretically neutral, but as the narrative progresses, the reader will come to perceive that each voice and section are particular to the depicted character.

Pap Ndiaye's analysis presents the historical context by which "'les Noirs' sont devenus 'noirs'" in France (Pap Ndiaye 43) and *Ladivine* asks the same: Marie NDiaye's interpretation of racial identity through a lens of magical realism recognizes its existence as a subjective social phenomenon. The need or desire to "pass" originates from *perceived* race; Ladivine Rivière does not have this same burden because she is more visibly white than Clarisse, though she shares her mother's ancestry. Clarisse Rivière does not look *un*like her mother, and they in fact have extremely similar faces, making their relation clear to anyone who sees them together. Ladivine Rivière doesn't need to pass as white (in the manner that Clarisse Rivière wears makeup to accentuate her "peau fraiche") because she appears white, highlighting the problems inherent in the notion of "racial passing" and in a social conception of race determined by visual signifiers. We can also consider *Ladivine* and its attention to the "visage" as an expression of the

relationship between masquerade and race, and given other associations with the book (such as language of nonbeing, hell, violence), we can interpret this book specifically in relation to Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Fanon considers the totality of colonialism and of racism, in that every aspect of the human experience is affected by colonial logic. Variations of "dévoiler" appear several times in *Ladivine*, referring to *visages*, *regards*, and emotions.

There are contextual elements of such markers, as Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière's identities change depending on location and nearby relations, complicated by certain visual markers of race being used as a reason to stigmatize identities (such as Ladivine Sylla's hair texture, which Clarisse did not inherit). And in the physical descriptions of Ladivine Rivière (her hair, golden skin, legs, and figure), it is implied she might indeed look more like her grandmother than she can be aware, and perhaps she only implicitly passes as white French because of her parents (one of whom is, of course, passing) and husband. Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière's whiteness is established by association or location.

B. Passing, Marriage, and Assimilation

When Clarisse eventually marries a white French car dealer, she *seems* to have found what she thought would afford her belonging whiteness, Frenchness, middle classness, and, importantly, the nuclear family she did not have as a child. Yet the familial absence she suffered is only replicated for her daughter, her in-laws reject her, and her husband divorces her. This demonstrates the cyclical nature of abandonment and absence that exists not only because of social rejection (classism, racism, and sexism) but the burden of not having a family to belong to, and the particular burden of knowing that family exists but does not exist for Clarisse. Just as Ladivine did not reveal her family to Clarisse, Clarisse does not reveal Ladivine Sylla to Ladivine Rivière.

Ladivine Rivière lives in Europe and is married to a German man, and yet she is still paranoid about being connected to her family and is unable to sever that connection. She becomes extremely anxious when her co-teacher shows her a newspaper recounting the story of her mother's murder. Ladivine Rivière is able to better occupy a space of Frenchness when she is away from her family. She is more French in Germany, where she is perceived to have a glamourous French accent. To Ladivine Rivière's "native Gironde," Germany belonged to "un monde lointain, exotique, envers lequel l'indifférence qu'il nous inspire nous a préservés de tout préjugé mais si profondément étranger par ailleurs qu'on ne pourrait sans un petit rire de dérision imaginer y vivre" (192) Marie NDiaye personally lives in the Gironde region of France when she is not in Germany and it figures in other works, including *Trois femmes puissantes*, in which Fanta and Rudy move from Senegal to the Gironde region.[44] The dichotomy between the Gironde and Germany — the Gironde being the largest department in southwestern France and home to Bordeaux — is depicted here with much more difference than might be expected from two locations in Europe. Germany provides Ladivine Rivière an increased sense of belonging because her difference is rooted in chosen displacement, language, and nationality, rather than in family estrangement.

[44] Many of NDiaye's works take place in this region of Southwest France, and when asked why, NDiaye says "C'est un endroit que je connais bien…", as she lives between Bordeaux and La Réole. These settings, combined with the subject matter and origins of her characters (ex. the single mothers and the Senegalese characters) explain the desire by many readers to find autobiographical elements in her stories. Unnamed settings are also quite typical of NDiaye's work, but they do take on additional meaning in the context of racialization: Pap Ndiaye suggests that it is more common to mention country of origin than it is to mention ethnicity when defining a culture or race (ex. "un restaurant sénégalais" as opposed to "un restaurant wolof") (Pap Ndiaye 51). NDiaye erases African traces. This coincides with a western tendency to refer to Africa as a country, reducing its population and geographical variation to a single entity (i.e. specifying individual nations in Europe, while African nations are simply "Africa"). We must also acknowledge have been deeply affected by colonial borders; NDiaye's decision to rarely name nations can thus also be a rejection of colonial border-making.

For Clarisse, "passing" is an *act* and a choice, whereas for Ladivine Rivière, it is a choice made for her without her knowledge, consent, or her father's awareness. It is also contextual, in a similar but different fashion to Clarisse. Clarisse's whiteness depends on choosing not to be near her mother; Ladivine Rivière's whiteness is commented on without her knowledge that it is in question. Ladivine Rivière's skin is described as "doré" ("ses épaules au bel arrondi doré") and it sometimes seems she might be less perceivably white than her mother, but both of her parents are French and she thus seems to pass as white French. For both women, race and immediate visual impression depends upon comparison.

As Clarisse erases her mother, Richard Rivière is frightened of the parts of his daughter he does not understand and responds by erasing *himself* from her identity, referring to Ladivine Rivière as the child born to Clarisse Rivière,[45] and participating very minimally the lives of Annika and Daniel. Ladivine Rivière is a fabrication of her mother's making — and ultimately, too, of Ladivine Sylla's making, due to the information withheld from Clarisse. (It is also, of course, normal and even inevitable for children to not know the complete life stories of their parents.) Richard says he will embrace the new faces of both Ladivine Rivière and Clarisse, should they return to him. He wonders what it means to have had a child with a "simulacrum," finding the idea repellent. Yet he has replaced his "simulacrum" with yet another and does not discuss the oddness of marrying a second (white French) Clarisse. Richard is more public with his second wife than his first: his friends in Africa are completely unaware of the first Clarisse. Clarisse Rivière (the first wife) is a simulacrum of a white French woman; Clarisse Rivière (the

[45] Further, upon remarrying Clarisse Rivière and "replacing" her with a white French Clarisse, Richard Rivière "replaces" Ladivine Rivière with a stepson. These new family members do not bring him peace or joy and seem to be emotionally and financially draining, though Richard's section is extremely short and we are not provided with too many details about Clarisse II and her son Trevor — merely that Richard wishes Clarisse Rivière (now deceased) would return to him.

second wife) is a simulacrum of the first Clarisse Rivière. We have two Clarisses and two Ladivines, none of whom are aware of their counterparts. This means characters never obtain what they seek, because they will not admit what they actually want or who they actually are.

C. Subjective Social Representations and Fluid Identity

We might consider Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra (Baudrillard, 3), which suggests the distinction between the natural and its imitation is indistinguishable in modern society: Clarisse Rivière (the first wife) is imitating a subjective and socially constructed notion of middle-class whiteness and the nuclear family, while Clarisse Rivière (the second wife) is replacing a woman who was herself not completely "real." Ultimately, only the reader and narrator can fully perceive the identities of these women, making for a complex conception of "passing." Ladivine Rivière, for example, *does* pass in her daily life as she is unaware she is biracial — but the reader is privy to this fact, so Ladivine Rivière as perceived by the reader is different than Ladivine Rivière as perceived by her family and herself.

Ladivine is perhaps a perfect illustration of the effects of the idea that "la 'race' n'existait plus comme réalité biologique objectivable, mais elle existait quand même encore comme représentation sociale" (Pap Ndiaye 37). Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière inhabit an alterity that affects their outward relationships and self-perceptions. Richard does not know Clarisse is biracial, but senses an emptiness in their relationship because she does not reveal her entire self; Ladivine Rivière does not know she is biracial, but experiences derision from her German colleague and an uncanny welcoming in Africa; Annika likewise does not know she is biracial but has dreams about marrying Wellington. The experiences of Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière suggest that passing is not wholly possible because it is both psychologically untenable and too dependent upon outside forces to be autonomously determined or consistent. That is to say

that these women are able to be physically perceived as white, but their whiteness is born of suppressing or avoiding stigmatizing and is thus carries its own stigmas.

The incapacity to name what specifically Richard finds empty or unsettling about Clarisse points to the effects of an arbitrary but persistent "représentation sociale." The need for universalism in a multiracial, multicultural society is predicated on the fact that identity is inherently *not* universal. The doubling of Clarisse Rivière shows there is more to race and nationality than having a French name and appearing (or "passing") as white, and not acknowledging difference does not erase race does not create conditions of non-racism (despite the claims of French universalism). Richard was aware of his first wife's "difference," even if he does not name it, as he introduces his second wife to white French companions who did not meet his first wife. Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière's experiences further suggest there is an unbreakable connection to ancestry, which will erupt (much like the femme-poisson's song) whether or not one is aware of the connection, as seen during Ladivine Rivière's experiences in Africa.

Marie NDiaye has commented on her own such experiences while travelling in Guadeloupe:

> Ce qui était amusant et intéressant à Marie-Galante, en Guadeloupe, c'était que j'étais vue comme une Antillaise (alors que je ne le suis pas), et que Jean-Yves et les enfants étaient vus comme des "métros," des Français on dit là-bas. Dans tous les autres endroits où on était allé, c'était l'inverse. Mais j'aime plutôt bien me sentir étrangère dans un lieu finalement. (Clair 27)

This again highlights the contextual and subjective nature of nationality and identity, formed by colonial borders and histories. Despite being French and living in Europe, Ladivine Rivière is "recognized" by locals in the unnamed country and is also protected from colonial guilt in the museum. There are multiple strains of identity: ancestral identity, of which she is unaware;

nationality, of which the local residents are unaware; and racial identity, which changes based on her nearby relations. The genuineness or purpose of this connection is ambiguous: it might appear it is entirely fabricated by external social perceptions and pressures (that is to say, Ladivine Rivière should want to visit Africa to reclaim an ancestry of which she is unaware), but there is also a certain closure when the women turn into dogs.

VI. A Strange Narrative Immersion

NDiaye creates a unique form of character immersion by very selectively withholding information and continuously shifting perspective, mirroring the constant flux of identities the protagonists experience in themselves and with each other. *Ladivine*'s narration opens in a similar manner to that of *Trois femmes puissantes*: in the middle of the protagonist's train of thought, as recounted by a third-person omniscient narrator. The third-person narrator is again privy to information and sentiment internal to the protagonist. The vast majority of the novel focuses on Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière and changes in narrative perspective are signaled by page breaks and changes in the repeated name. This *in media res* approach is made more disconcerting by shifts in chronology and perspective, with details about the plot revealed out of order as characters weave in and out of memories. The reader is given access to the *fragilité psychologique* of each character as *they* experience it, providing an intimate and unsettling depiction of their self-identity and the way they perceive their surroundings, including their perceptions/conceptions of their family members.

This third-person non-character narration also equalizes the characters linguistically. If we return to Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Firstly, Fanon discusses the dilemma of language preserving colonial systems, and of language and racial embodiment. Speaking French is an aspect of colonial subjection: "Nous attachons une importance fondamentale au

phénomène du langage. C'est pourquoi nous estimons nécessaire cette étude étude qui doit nous livrer un des éléments de compréhension de la dimension pour-autrui de l'homme de couleur. Étant entendu que parler, c'est exister absolument pour l'autre" (Fanon 13). Language enunciation *between* speakers, and the third-person narration without much dialogue erases the existence "absolument pour l'autre," affording a linguistic independence as they do not exist for the reader or the other characters. Additionally, the third-person narration avoids language performance by characters, which is particularly notable in the case of Ladivine Sylla. We are able to experience her perspective without needing her to perform colonial language for the reader.

The use of questions and rapid line breaks give the impression we are witnessing the characters think through questions in real time, further demonstrated by abrupt changes to the train of thoughts as influenced by changes in the setting (for example, when a bus abruptly stops and Ladivine Rivière thought process is interrupted: "Mais, elle, la fille de Clarisse Rivière … [Line break] Le bus freina brusquement. Ladivine heurta de l'épaule la poitrine d'une femme qui transpirait en abondance" [*Ladivine*, NDiaye 217]). NDiaye uses free indirect discourse (in the third-person), speech patterns (such as rhetorical questions, repetitive sentence structures, and multi-clause sentences), and interruptive line breaks (such as ellipses) to create a narration akin to a stream-of-consciousness, despite stream-of-consciousness narratives typically occurring in the first-person. There are frequent questions posed without quotation marks or a second present character, suggesting the protagonist in question is posing the question to themselves, and/or to the reader. NDiaye also frequently uses phrases such as "s/he thought" or "s/he wondered" to signal an interior focalization; that is to say, the narrator does not have more information than the characters themselves or the reader.

For example:

> Mais comment, pensait Ladivine le cœur tenaillé, comme un tel homme pouvait-il espérer protéger de la moindre agression d'aussi petits enfants et de quoi se nourrissait pour ceux-ci l'illusion qu'un tel père leur était un rempart ?
> De quoi, vraiment, chez cet homme impressionnable, sentimental à l'excès ?
> Oh, elle les aimait tous les trois, mais non sans détresse. […]
> Alors ? Se demandait-elle dans le bus […]. (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 214)

And again, from the perspective of Richard Rivière, towards the end of the novel:

> Pourquoi, sinon, se demandait-il, Clarisse Rivière se serait-elle mise à la colle avec ce tocard ?
> Pour le sexe, il n'en croyait rien. L'homme avait une face d'alcoolique et quelque chose de répugnant, de vil qui lui semblait être un remède à toute espèce d'amour.
> Elle avait cherché, se disait-il en des affres de jalousie qu'il n'avait encore jamais éprouvées, quelqu'un, n'importe Il qui (et peut-être volontairement celui qui serait aveugle à ce qu'elle lui offrirait ?) devant lequel elle pût se dévoiler.
> Était-ce vraiment cela ? Il n'était plus certain de rien. (392)

Both of these voices have similar tones and sentence structures, despite detailing different characters. The questions are shared with the reader in "real time" as the characters ponder them, and we are not given answers because the characters themselves do not have answers, creating an effect where the reader somewhat occupies the thinking/speaking voice because the voice does not overtly belong to a first-person protagonist.

This writing style — the frequent line breaks, the absence of quotations, the questions directed to the self — is characteristic of NDiaye, and appears in every book we've discussed thus far, as well as her larger body of work. Yet NDiaye's tone *does* vary between books and each book has its own set of voices, suggesting the use of third-person omniscient narrators who are neither NDiaye herself nor a character in the book's universe. The clearest example of this is Khady Demba's narration, which has a naïveté and repetitive structure that is noticeably different from NDiaye's other writing. The stylistic choice in *Ladivine* creates the sense that the women have inherited an ancestral consciousness or are repeating histories and this common

voice underlines the intergenerational nature of these struggles with identity. The omniscient narrator also facilitates the oscillation between Clarisse and Malinka by being able to note the change in a way the character herself would not (ex. "Clarisse thought" transitioning into "Malinka thought" mid-paragraph), especially as the shift is sometimes affected by the perception of another character in the scene (when Clarisse is with her mother *vs* when she is with her husband). The ambiguous voice also underscores the cyclical family narratives and the parallels between (grand)children and their parents, further supported by Ladivine Rivière's voyage to Ladivine Sylla's home nation. The generations of daughters do not share identical thoughts or stories but their consciousness is linked: they are literally *of* each other — of the same lineage (represented by the name parallels of Ladivine Sylla/Ladivine Rivière and Malinka Sylla/Annika Berger).

The choice to enter in the middle of thoughts or scenes is particularly striking during Clarisse's point of view, with the alternations between *Clarisse* and *Malinka* — often in the same paragraph or sentence. This double naming does not occur in any other character's section. As previously discussed, the use of "their" and "her" within single passages, suggests that she is sometimes Clarisse *and* Malinka, and sometimes she is occupying (and remembering) just one of these identities. This occurs less frequently as the text goes on to focus on Clarisse's adult life and she spends less time with her mother. The narrative tells us:

> Clarisse Rivière savait aussi qu'il était exact, en revanche, comme Malinka en avait eu très tôt l'intuition, que personne au monde ne se souciait de leur existence, non parce que ces deux créatures, la servante et la fille vénérée, inspiraient l'antipathie mais simplement parce que nul lien ne les rattachait à personne. Malinka ne se trouvaient de fait dans la zone d'affection et de sollicitude de personne […]. Malinka ressentait qu'elles étaient aussi seules qui si le monde autour d'elles était mort, puisqu'il n'y avait dans ce monde nul amour à elles destiné, qu'on n'y échangeait nul propos tendre ou inquiet les concernant, la servante au visage mince, aux longs membres nerveux et celle qu'elle appelait sa fille malgré les apparences. (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 27-28)

The change between Malinka and Clarisse never occurs externally, implying an alignment between the narrative voice and the character's inner perspective. The divide between Clarisse and Malinka means that, up until the relationship with Freddy Moliger partway through the novel, she is Malinka and Clarisse only to herself. Richard Rivière does not know of Malinka's childhood identity and former name, and her mother is not privy to her new life with Richard. She thus alternates between being Clarisse, Malinka, and Clarisse-Malinka, depending on the circumstance and spectator.[46]

Clarisse is only able to oscillate between these different selves by denying her inner judgements and feelings (at least as perceived by her daughter), and she cannot forget Malinka because she cannot forget her mother: "Clarisse Rivière, aveugle à la faute et n'en commettant jamais" (179); "Ladivine, sa fille, était persuadée que Clarisse Rivière ne voyait sincèrement rien de mal à cela, qu'elle était incapable de juger de ce fait, car c'était ainsi et tout ce qui était devait être admis" (180). It is not always clear what is known by the surrounding characters, what is internal to the protagonist in question, or what the characters *themselves* are conscious of. The people who "knew" her as Clarisse were aware she was not open with them, as evidenced by her divorce and her tenuous relationship with her daughter.

Jeffrey Zuckerman writes in the *New Republic* that "NDiaye's refusal to immerse us within her characters' minds makes it seem as if something crucial is being withheld, as if we are continually being presented with mere veneers a sensation at odds with the sheer amount of attention NDiaye devotes to thoughts, feelings, and impulses" (Zuckerman). Zuckerman also

[46] Again, we might consider the femme-poisson, who insists she is neither just a woman nor just a fish, and who suffers when she arrives on land and cannot be woman *and* fish. Considering *Ladivine* alongside *La Naufragée* reinforces *La Naufragée* as a depiction of cultural hybridity, and reinforces *Ladivine* as a depiction of the psychological turmoil of being starved of water and forced to "live on land."

notes the predominance of silence in *Ladivine*: "It's so much easier for people in this book to be silent than to talk (or be honest, I mean). When the characters become dogs or even just pass successfully, they go quiet, they refuse to talk about elephants in the room" (Bady, Gentry, and Zuckerman). This interpretation is quite fair — there is a lot of thinking, but not a lot of direct speech, and this fact is indeed exactly why Richard says he left Clarisse (an emptiness in their relationship), but *Ladivine* is not a plot-driven work. If characters are not talking to each other, the narrator is not a character, and we are not immersed in the characters' minds — what *are* we experiencing? Clarisse Rivière is a manifestation of her present experiences, the process of erasure, and the erased child Malinka; Ladivine Rivière is the identity she was born into and the parts of herself that exist without her knowledge but not necessarily unbeknownst to the people around her (for example, her negative experiences with the other French school teacher); Annika is the daughter of Ladivine Rivière and will also be formed by her absence, becoming the daughter of a missing mother. Like the bloody shadow on the ground after Wellington's not-murder, we are witnessing the remnants of erased/destroyed identities before and as they are refabricated.

There is certainly a degree of separation between the reader and the characters, given the third-person narration, but there is nevertheless an undeniable intimacy to this narration, aided by the very distance which causes it to feel so peculiar. I suggest NDiaye's particular style of world-building and the oscillating narrators exposes the reader to a strange narrative intimacy that acts as an unsettling immersion. That is to say, the reader actually *is* immersed in the characters' minds, but because the characters themselves suppress their minds, we are immersed in an absence (which is nevertheless an immersion because it reflects the characters' consciousness). And as the characters become suspicious of their surroundings when strange

events occur (for example, Ladivine Rivière's misrecognition on vacation), the reader is constantly "taken out" of the story to question who we are witnessing, especially as there is not a consistent timeline. This is not consistently a retrospective narrative, but characters do reflect on events in the past (from the very beginning, when adult Clarisse Rivière presents her childhood) as these events become pertinent to their present, in a demonstration of the effect of unprocessed (or forgotten) childhood memory on the adult sense of self.

We are also not given foundations for this story such as consistent setting, timeframes, or names, meaning there is a constant fog of withheld information, a narrative opacity that parallels the information these protagonists carry themselves. This creates a perplexing, corrupted "narrative intimacy," a term proposed by Sara Klassen Day in *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*. "Narrative intimacy" between the protagonist and reader is created by disclosure of information to which characters surrounding the protagonists are not privy. Klassen Day analyzes first-person and journal writing in contemporary Young Adult fiction, but I believe the term is helpful in understanding the peculiarity of NDiaye's third-person narrative style and tenuous intimacy.

Klassen Day discusses a "logical gap" (citing Peter Lamarque) between fiction and reality, meaning the reader is incapable of responding to the protagonist with judgment or rejection because they are reading a book. The protagonist likewise cannot respond to the reader, meaning the reader is (like the protagonist) given space to explore facets of *their* self as reflected in the text without judgment.[47] The grand caveat in the case of *Ladivine* is that the narrative intimacy both is and is not between the protagonist and reader, because the narration

[47] As I will mention in my conclusion in reference to Andrew Asibong's *Blankness and Recognition*, there is indeed a consistent tendency for readers to project themselves into NDiaye's work. Where the narrative withholds, the reader supplements with details from NDiaye's life as well as their own.

both is and is not from the point of view of the protagonist. The reader is privy to information the protagonists do not know and this information is presented contextually (not directly disclosed by the third-person narrator), such as in the case of Ladivine Rivière's biracial identity. The reader knows Ladivine Rivière is biracial because the book contains multiple sections from different generations and we have encountered Ladivine Sylla. Thus, when the narrative refers to her skin and hair, we have context for words such as "bronze" which Ladivine Rivière does not possess herself.

We can compare this disclosure to that of *Un pas de chat sauvage*, which feels more immediately intimate than Ladivine, as it is in the first-person and has a journal-writing quality as the narrator recounts the difficulty with her project. Yet there is an unreliability to this narrator due to withheld information (the narrator revealing their race halfway through the book). The extra-heterodiegetic narrators of *Ladivine* maintain an unreliability (*who* is speaking?) while being more reliable than many of NDiaye's first-person narrators (such as *Un pas de chat sauvage* or *Autoportrait en vert*) because the reader is presented with information with which to fill in memory gaps. We know the Rivière-Sylla women because of their family context (perhaps more than they know themselves). The closeness between the reader and protagonist is deepened by the third-person point of view that is interior to the protagonists, because we are privy to this "disclosed" (or withheld) information as well as the protagonists' subconscious experiencing of it (for example, when Ladivine Rivière speaks critically of her body as compared to her mother's, we have information about her mother that she does not possess). This holds true for characters whose non-autonomous "disclosure" is not racial identity. Because of the changes in narrative perspective, we are also privy to information about Ladivine Sylla and Clarisse Rivière that they do not themselves know: we witness Clarisse Rivière's judgment of

her mother, Ladivine Sylla's pain after she is estranged by Clarisse Rivière, and we are privy to Richard Rivière's thoughts about his first wife and the emptiness of their relationship.

This information disclosed to the reader by the story's context and not by protagonist creates an unequal relationship between the reader and protagonist, and does not preclude potential for judgment, hindering empathy because we are not informationally aligned with the protagonist. To this end, narrative intimacy is uniquely complex in the context of a racial passing narrative, and this is a key difference between the third-person narrations of *Trois femmes puissantes* and *Ladivine*. In *Ladivine*, the reader is privy to information about the protagonist that risks their foundation of self and family (and potentially their safety), creating an extremely unequal power dynamic that mirrors the social framework on which it is based. The reader is capable of determining and naming the protagonists' identities in ways they are not.

Andrew Asibong's appraisal of NDiaye's style describes ndiayïenne alterity as a manifestation of the "uncanny": "To be stigmatized is an inherently uncanny experience, replete with doubt, hesitation, paranoia, and faulty interpretations. NDiaye's habitual inscription of informational gaps or bewildering shifts in the perceptions or behavior of characters responding to another's alleged 'difference' may be, for some readers, fantastical; for others it is, like the strange world of NDiaye itself, utterly quotidian" (Asibong 30). As this quote suggests, NDiaye's form of character immersion is particularly rewarding for the devoted reader of NDiaye, immersed in a multi-work project in which the strange depiction of characters' minds (does this narration belong to the author? To the protagonist?) becomes an ordinary way to experience a world in which the characters are rejecting and erasing their own thoughts. I propose the conceptions behind narrative intimacy (disclosure, closeness, a nonjudgmental space in which to be perceived) are a primary reason NDiaye's work is so frequently studied as an ensemble,

and why readers of NDiaye truly devote themselves to her catalogue on the whole. There is so much that is *not* said, and so much camouflaged but extremely perceptive and honest appraisal of the world, that the reader feels they've seen through the looking glass and are "in the know." That is to say, each book begets increased understanding of NDiaye's other books due to consistent themes, allegories, and narration (an intimacy between the author and the reader, who is perceiving more of the world than the world would allow, as if NDiaye is disclosing the secret schema of society).

To return to Jordan Zuckerman's interpretation of NDiaye's refusal to allow readers access to the characters' minds, we can subscribe to Andrew Asibong's concept of "blankness," which helps the reader interpret NDiaye's "zombified" and "deadened" characters, as Asibong describes them. NDiaye's characters are reluctant to speak, be identified, or to even be named. Asibong proposes that most of NDiaye's protagonists "perform their blankness via a strangely cut-off, unemotional demeanor, a deadness which seemingly nothing can wake up or make come alive" (Asibong 3). *Ladivine* plunges the reader into these holes, examining the internalization of ancestral or parental ghosts and experiencing how each generation perpetuates the psychological fragility of effacement. An erased or "blank" identity is not an absence of a self.

VII. Escape and Metamorphosis

The metamorphosis into dogs is, like the novel itself, quite ambiguous and multi-layered. We will discuss the transformations or reincarnations of Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse Rivière, and Ladivine Rivière first as an escape from a cruel world and as allegories for racist othering. I will also propose that these dogs have a theological and mythological grounding, and are a reference to *La Divina Commedia*. I will refer to additional religious allusions, such as

Ladivine Sylla as a Virgin Mary figure, that frame these transformations as manifestations of punishments and/or repentance for human sin. I propose that the duality of these transformations — first, as allegories for alterity (as the dogs are more frequently interpreted); second, as both a damning and a rebirth — demonstrates 1) NDiaye's consistent transhistorical and transliterary engagement (reflecting Dante's use of Christian and classical notions of Hell), and 2) the neutrally and inescapably cruel world.

The protagonists of *Ladivine* become "blank" as they reconstruct their identities, at the expense of their ancestral lineage, family connections, and capacity to form connections with their partners and children. Ladivine Sylla and Clarisse Rivière never reveal their entire selves to the people in their lives, even when that means hiding from and losing their family. They respond to this loss with complete escape, transforming into dogs when faced with intense emotional distress or death. Interestingly, apart from Clarisse's lie about her name and mother (which are less a lie and more a means of playacting the person she has manifested), the characters do not lie to each other. They simply do not reveal information, creating fuller transformations by not speaking what has been suppressed. Yet the reader becomes increasingly aware over the course of the novel — in ways that the characters do not — that these unspoken secrets are never as opaque as Clarisse and Ladivine believe them to be. We learn that Richard is at least partially aware of his wife's secrets and believes his daughter has followed in her footsteps. He would like to see Ladivine "transformed" and "enlightened" about Clarisse Rivière. At this point, the reader knows that Ladivine *has* transformed into a dog, and while it's not entirely clear if Richard is aware of this fact, it appears he knows there has been an event even, if he cannot perceive it: "Il n'aurait peur, songeait-il, du nouveau visage de ni l'une ni de l'autre" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 392).

Malinka was only able to become Clarisse by suppressing her own emotions and childhood memories, and it is as a dog that they are once again felt. Clarisse's very existence turns Ladivine Sylla into someone else and Clarisse can only ever know Ladivine Sylla post-motherhood metamorphosis. The transformation into dogs personifies this change to the self and demonstrates that this shift in identity can only be understood or enacted upon when the daughters themselves become mothers. When Clarisse Rivière is murdered, stripped of her human identity after years of disguising it, she turns into a dog. As she dies, Clarisse "se sentait flotter au gré du flux et du reflux d'une onde chaude, épaisse dont la masse contrariait tout mouvement qu'elle eût pu tenter. […] Il lui fallait faire confiance à l'obtuse mais sûre persévérance du flot lourd et dense qui l'entraînait et lorsqu'elle aperçut les abords de la forêt sombre, touffue, aux cimes hautes et noires sur le ciel noir, elle songea seulement: Je ne suis jamais entrée dans une forêt profonde sans révolte cependant, certaine qu'elle serait bien là où elle devait être" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 133). This connects Clarisse to the unnamed African country Ladivine Rivière will visit and also to Ladivine Rivière's ambiguous death/disappearance/transformation, during which she enters a forest in Africa and does not reemerge as a human.

The transformation into dogs can symbolize stigmatized and dehumanized identity (Blackness, poverty, immigrant status, being a single mother or the daughter of a single mother). Yet the transformation is also freeing when seen within the shared familial metamorphosis, a communal experience and consciousness.[48] They perceive more and can themselves be

[48] Despite the tragedy of *needing* to transform to find acceptance or peace in a world that rejects them, the freeing nature of these transformations is supported by metamorphoses in other works by NDiaye, including the transformation into birds in *Trois femmes puissantes*, especially in the case of Khady, who becomes capable of reaching her destination and continues living despite having died (as happens for Clarisse Rivière).

perceived more, because they have gained a strength by separating themselves from those who have hurt them, and being dogs affords the women a power or agency they do not otherwise have. Richard's parents are suspicious of Clarisse Rivière, but are unable to rid themselves of the dog (presumed to be Ladivine Sylla), who does not just follow them but lives with them becoming a part of their family in a capacity they will not allow Clarisse Rivière. When the dog first appears alongside his parents, Richard is fearful despite its seemingly gentle nature. The men do not need to transform because they already possess a power or extra knowledge within these relationships and this power is stripped from them by the women-as-dogs because the men characters do not hold the capacity to perceive the transformation. I suggest the dog transformations in *Ladivine* are again a subversion of metamorphoses themes of eco-fiction, as well as a reference to certain mythological and theological themes of hell and crucifixion.

A. *L'Enfer, c'est une zone de non-être*

We have three dogs in *Ladivine*: Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse Rivière, and Ladivine Rivière. When manifested as dogs, the women share a deeper familial connection than they do as humans, when their identities are obscured or hidden. We can also consider the dog Cerberus from Greek mythology, the dog with many heads (often portrayed as having three) who guarded the Underworld to ensure the dead remained with Hades. The name Cerberus originates from "Erebus," one of the primordial Greek deities; this opposes *Clarisse*, or *clarus*, or light. In *Divina Commedia*, Cerberus inhabits the third circle of Hell. Cerberus tries to attack Dante and Virgil but is silenced when Virgil throws dirt into each of the creature's three mouth, and the ground of the third circle of Hell is swampy. This links to Ladivine Rivière intentionally entering a forest before her metamorphosis, as well as the comparison to the forest as Clarisse dies: "elle aperçut la forêt sombre, touffue, aux cimes hauts noires sur le ciel noir, elle songea seulement:

Je ne suis jamais entrée dans une forêt profonde" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 133). The three women turning into dogs in a reference to Cerberus suggests Earth *is* hell and the women are guiding their kin through its torments.

In *Divina Commedia*, the third circle of hell is that of Gluttony. This aligns with the harm men cause women in *Ladivine*: Clarisse meets Richard thanks to her job at a restaurant, and part of Richard's value is in his wealth and class. Freddy is not wealthy, but he meets Ladivine Sylla and Malinka over shared meals. It is at the market while buying ingredients for a dinner with Clarisse and Freddy that Ladivine Sylla learns of Clarisse's death (a hearty meal of lamb, haricots verts, canopés, wine, and bacon). Ladivine Sylla's narration ponders: "Ce Freddy Moliger, elle l'avait remarqué, était gourmand, presque avide, il mangeait vite, absorbé et dédaigneux, comme plein de condescendance pour son propre appétit, mais n'était-ce pas ainsi [...] que voulaient apparaître ceux qu'on avait mal nourris dans leur enfance, à qui on avait jeté avec moins de sentiment encore qu'à des chiens des portions chiches et mal cuisinées?" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 137). She goes to the most expensive butcher at the Marché des Capucins, only wanting the "plus fin" and "plus tendre" for Freddy, whereas Clarisse "mangeait toute chose de la même façon, sans manières, sans intérêt ni conscience et elle aimait tour car la nourriture lui était indifférente" (138). Freddy's hunger is insatiable: even given the finest and most expensive food Ladivine Sylla can find, he describes Ladivine Sylla to Clarisse as a "nothing."

The Marché des Capucins is a real market in Bordeaux, and it also alludes to the Capucins, an order of monks who seek a life of extreme simplicity and austerity, contrasting the most decadent lamb Ladivine Sylla can buy. Lamb is, of course, a sacrificial animal. In John 1:29, John sees Jesus approach and says "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin

of the world," in reference to Jesus suffering crucifixion to absolve the world's sins. Ladivine Sylla (*la divine* Mother, a contrast to the divine Father) cannot serve Freddy the lamb because Clarisse has died at his hands.

Clarisse suffers a redemptive death and becomes a dog which allows her return to Ladivine Sylla and absolve the sin of having rejected and abandoned of her mother, about which she felt guilty her entire life. The murder is also associated with purity and sexuality. In *Mothers Voicing Mothering: The Representation of Motherhood in the Novels and Short Stories of Marie NDiaye*, Pauline Eaton suggests that beige cardigan can be understood as a cover up for Clarisse's relationship with Freddy Moliger. Clarisse puts the cardigan over a white shirt, and the white collar "débordait chastement" over the cardigan, suggesting Ladivine Rivière feels her mother is lacking a valuable prudishness, as Clarisse's relations with Freddy are tempestuous and sexual out of wedlock. Freddy's rejection of the cardigan suggests a wish to control her body and their relationship, and a rejection of her family; that is to say, Clarisse is not murdered because she has sexually "sinned," but because of control others wish to exert over her body: between gluttony (Freddy) and chastity (the cardigan).

Pauline Eaton alludes to the Madonna figure in the context of Clarisse Rivière's cardigan ("rewrapping her in the modest habit of a chaste Madonna figure" [Eaton 205]), and I would add that Ladivine Sylla can also be understood to inhabit the Madonna position. Clarisse Rivière's father is unseen and unnamed, as if she were miraculously conceived; and unlike the sexual history of Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière, Ladivine Sylla's sexual desires are not mentioned. Additionally, Ladivine Sylla collects weeping figurines and stares at them when she is depressed. After Clarisse Rivière is murdered, "Elle, nul ne l'avait consolée, nul n'avait passé sur ses joues une main tendre, au début, quand elle avait pleuré et pleuré sur Malinka" (*Ladivine*,

NDiaye 395). Ladivine Sylla acts as the figure of the weeping Virgin Mary, who cries about the seven sorrows, the fifth sorrow being the crucifixion of Jesus. Clarisse acts as Christ figure, murdered by Freddy, who shares the name of a Saint.

The women are grounded in a hell-on-earth afterlife, but, as Cerberus, they are also the arbiters of escape, entry, and protection. Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière both return to Annika and watch over her. In Psalm 46: 4-5, we are told "There is a river its streams delight the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the *Most High*. *God is within her*; she will not be toppled. God will help her when the morning dawns"; "God will help her with *his face*" (italics my own). There is a river (Rivière) and "Most High" may refer to Berger, or mountains. *God is within her* suggests a duality in Clarisse and Ladivine Rivière: they are protectors of hell (as dogs) and they are godly figures protecting Annika. The narrative often refers to Clarisse's face, and recognizing her face when she is a dog. By contrast, when Richard's father is eaten by the dog, his neck and face are torn off, which can symbolize Ladivine Sylla claiming Richard's face to protect Clarisse Rivière. Unlike *Divina Commedia* (though "divine" was not in Dante's original title, which was just *Commedia*) NDiaye has not called her novel either a tragedy or comedy, choosing just *Divina*, and the ending is unclear.

Given the previously discussed connections to *Peau noire, masques blancs*, we can additionally consider hell as described by Fanon in this book: "Il y a une zone de non-être, une région extraordinairement stérile et aride, une rampe essentiellement dépouillée, d'où un authentique surgissement peut prendre naissance. Dans la majorité des cas, le Noir n'a pas le bénéfice de réaliser cette descente aux véritables Enfers" (Fanon 6). The Sylla and Rivière inhabit this space of "non-être": they are perceived by each other and seem to maintain some semblance of their personhood (suggested by their recognition of each other and the language

of their hearts being within the dogs), but they otherwise inhabit a "zone de non-être," unperceived and unconsidered by the general world. They are, however, aware of this descent. The metamorphosis contributes to the women's escape of colonial consciousness: as dogs, they communicate outside of language. Fanon's introduction continues: "Le problème est d'importance. Nous ne tendons à rien de moins qu'à libérer l'homme de couleur de lui-même" (6). Metamorphosis into mythical dog is a form of liberation because it suggests a power over their newly inhabited world, as Cerberus is the arbiter of this space. It also facilitates the reunion of Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse, and Ladivine Rivière, and Annika.

The biblical associations also raise questions about the nature of sin and guilt, about an inherent evil in the normal world, and an incapacity to defeat it. Evil is ambiguous and cyclical and it is not always punished. The men are not forced into Hell, and do not inhabit a "zone de non-être" as they do not need to mask their identity, and Clarisse is unduly punished for her fraught relationship with her mother, and Ladivine Sylla is punished with the loss of a daughter.

B. Memory and Return

The animal form provides an opportunity for escape and the process is not depicted; indeed, it is not always even clear that the humans *have* transformed. The dehumanization typically implicated by animal-human transformation is nuanced of the dehumanization of these characters *as* humans, and thus their "return to nature" and return to a symbolic collective memory provides escape from an immoral humanity. We can use eco-fiction motifs to understand these transformations and constructions of identity: a social understand of race is not an inherent value or concept, and depends upon a subjective human definition, or humanity (society) asserting control over a natural entity (humans). Shirley Jordan describes this transformation as literalizing "the idea that the animal and the human are embedded in each

other" (Jordan 54), proposing that the merging of animal and human bodies facilitates the women to meet "outside the poisonous parameters of race, class, and poverty." Clarisse Rivière transforms following human violence and Ladivine Rivière transforms in a forest, and Ladivine Sylla has a fluid metamorphoses but her memories are associated with the natural landscape of her origin nation. These metamorphoses thus create an association between the natural world and the human world, and also underscore that difference is inherent to the natural world but race as a categorization is a construct of humans.

Like the association between the femme-poisson's ancestral memories and her poisson half, the dog is associated with an emotional awakening, as well as with the remembering of suppressed memories (reminiscent of the femme-poisson's song):

> Ladivine Sylla, qui craignait les chats et se méfiait des chiens, l'ignora délibérément pour ne pas risquer de l'attirer auprès d'elle. […]
>
> Un souvenir de Malinka lui revint alors, celui du visage que l'enfant levait vers elle lorsque Ladivine Sylla rentrait du travail, dans cette minuscule maison au fond d'une cour, et que l'œil clair de la fillette croisant le sien la faisait frissonner d'un doux et grave étonnement. (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 396)

The dog also makes Ladivine Sylla think of herself:

> au temps de la colère, elle avait parfois l'impression, le matin, d'avoir passé toute la nuit à courir. […] Par quelles plaines avait-elle galopé, sur quelles prairies soufflait le vent dont elle croyait encore sentir l'odeur d'herbe sur le duvet de ses bras ? Il lui prenait l'envie de retourner là-bas où le vent avait sifflé à ses oreilles […] où l'air léger, parfumé avait balayé sa colère (396).

We can assume that "là-bas où le vent avait sifflé" is Ladivine Sylla's home nation, possibly also the location of Ladivine Rivière's vacation and transformation, and the sight of the dog Clarisse has caused her to return there, creating an association between emotion and memory. It is the *place* which washes away her anger, rather the attempt at suppressing that anger. There is the additional replication of Ladivine in this space, as it is her namesake who eventually "returns,"

suggesting a psychological link between the two Ladivines and the incapacity to completely move on from one's family or ancestry, *or* to fully visit and understand that ancestry. Ladivine Rivière does not remain in Africa – she returns to Germany with her daughter. It is perhaps not Africa that has swallowed up Ladivine Rivière, but rather, France as a colonizing or inhabiting force: she disappears after a visit to the home of Richard Rivière's car dealer acquaintances, who moved to Africa to make money.

C. Pity and Recognition

Annika resents her mother for leaving them so suddenly, but is sure that the dog's body is better suited to her mother than the skin of a woman. Annika believes her mother had simply grown tired of the daily tasks of motherhood – which Annika understands, having grown tired of her brother Daniel.[49] She is mostly frustrated on behalf of her father, who searches the internet for the lost Ladivine Rivière. "Tendresse" appears regularly alongside fear and violence, including in the murder of Clarisse. The understanding of his sadness and of her mother's departure is a demonstration of the "tendresse" the women characters in *Ladivine* continually show toward the men characters, even when they have been harmed or abandoned. Annika protects her father, "par amour et par pitié" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 333).

It is Annika who recognizes Ladivine Rivière after she has transformed into a dog: "Il semblait lui dire qu'il veillerait toujours sur elle, sur eux peut-être si Marko et Daniel constataient un jour sa présence, or Annika estimait n'avoir pas besoin de lui, et que le chien se fut arrogé le droit de se faire son protecteur lui paraissait insolent" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 329). It

[49] "Il lui semblait pouvoir comprendre, si jeune qu'elle fût et consciente de sa jeunesse, de son ignorance, que leur mère se fût lassée d'eux, les enfants, de leur vigueur et de leurs exigences, de leur société inévitable, quotidienne, de leurs humeurs et de leurs bavardages. Elle-même, Annika, était souvent fatiguée de la compagnie de Daniel. Elle se sentait pour une large part responsable de son frère, elle trouvait fardeau bien pesant et oppressant" (*Ladivine* 333).

is possible Marko and Daniel do not perceive the dog because they do not require its protection, as Annika has already stepped into the role of their guardian. Richard also remains unaware of the dog when it knocks at Ladivine Sylla's door, despite having said he will recognize their new faces. Annika isn't hurt by her mother on behalf of her own loss, but is angry about the grief that has overcome her father's life. Annika's childhood has been prematurely cut short and, in losing her mother, she has also lost her father. And while she feels a burden of protection for her father and brother and an associated resentment towards the dog, she nevertheless feels tied to it, hiding the dog out of worry that Daniel and Marko will recognize Ladivine and she will no longer be the sole person who can perceive her mother. The dog might even be a natural occurrence of motherhood for the Sylla lineage: the dogs are brown and Clarisse is described as having "marques brûnatres de grossesse" while pregnant.[50]

When Clarisse returns to her mother and Richard Rivière in the brief last section of the novel, she brings "le cœur palpitant de Malinka. […] sa joie, la promesse d'une clarté nouvelle posée sur chaque jour" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 403). In this final recognition/perception, Clarisse is fully Malinka, viewed and identified only by her mother. There is a sad hope to these encounters. In Ladivine Sylla's previous brief section, she describes her singular love for Malinka: "Oh, sa fille Malinka! Quel déchirement, oui, que Ladivine Sylla n'eût jamais trouvé personne d'autre à aimer! […] au fil des années, elle en était venue à croire qu'elles étaient prises toutes les deux dans les liens serrés d'un même sortilège que Malinka pas plus qu'elle-même ne pouvait dénouer" (138). Ladivine Sylla loves Malinka with "un cœur purifié, un cœur soulagé" (138).

[50] This association between femininity and transformation slightly contrasts *La Sorcière*, in which a woman transforms her ex-husband into a snail as a punishment, but it is the again a woman figure in *La Sorcière* who is capable of creating the physical change.

The narration asks: "Qui pouvait prétendre connaître Ladivine Sylla? Il n'y avait rien à apprendre à son sujet car elle était trop peu de chose. […] Mais, ce samedi, elle se montra ouverte, presque cordiale. Sa fille Malinka était en train de la reconnaître!" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 139). And when she seeks Malinka on the newspaper, announcing the murder: "C'était elle, sa fille Malinka, cette jolie femme de cinquante-ans c'était bien elle" (140). Ladivine Sylla believes she and Malinka are "toutes les deux dans les liens serrés d'un même sortilège que Malinka pas plus qu'elle-même ne pouvait dénouer, qu'elles étaient châtiées l'une comme l'autre aussi cruellement, aussi injustement" (138). And it is Freddy who will save them both: "Cet homme était en train de les tirer de la malédiction, elle, Ladivine Sylla, et sa fille Malinka, le seul être réel qu'elle aimât au monde comme il lui était dur de n'avoir que sa fille à aimer" (137). Transformation frees Ladivine Sylla, Clarisse, and eventually Ladivine Rivière from the malediction of shame at having abandoned their mothers and the resulting solitude.

The question of recognition and faces is ongoing in NDiaye's work (for example, the misrecognition or forgetting of faces in *En famille*, the strange women in *Autoportrait en vert*, and the ambiguous multiple Maria Martinez/Marie Sachs/Marie NDiaye). We might consider NDiaye's comment that "our memories are uncertain, that the ways we recall faces and things that people have said are unreliable" (Maurin). The narrator of Richard's section affirms "il n'aurait peur […] du nouveau visage, ni de l'une ni de l'autre" (*Ladivine* 392). In this instance, the "nouveau visage" might refer to the dog or it might refer to Clarisse becoming Malika and Ladivine Rivière knowing that she and her mother are biracial. The "nouveau visage" can, in another context, suggest Clarisse Rivière will not protect Richard Rivière: if "God will help her with his face," Richard does not perceive this face, but he *does* see the dog, suggesting he is not protected from the afterlife or the sins of earth by Clarisse Rivière. Ladivine Rivière sought to

disappear without causing harm, but there is an inevitable cost to her transformation: Marko's frantic grief and Annika's new responsibilities, as the transformation continues the cycle of absent fathers, lost mothers, and daughters who must raise themselves.

VIII. Conclusion

A. *Un récit souterrain*

The theatrical depiction of the protagonists in *Ladivine* is blurred by a language and culture and by NDiaye's own experiences, as if the playacting protagonists are also playacting some of the author's own experiences. In "The Image of Self-Effacement: The Revendication of the Autonomous Author in Marie NDiaye's *Autoportrait en vert*,"[51] Christopher Hogarth suggests that "the writer's work departs from that of the painter since when s/he begins to write, s/he cannot render her/himself as though looking at a mirror, but is instead affected by the culture and the language in which s/he is immersed. From this comes [Michel] Beaujour's famous definition of the self-portrait as a 'miroir d'encre': not a speculum but a mirror that is blurred by the ink of language and culture" (Hogarth 193-194). *Ladivine* is not exactly a mirror-like depiction of NDiaye's life, but does seem to reflect the experience of *being* Marie NDiaye: that is to say, a depiction of bicultural and biracial identity and interpretations and erasures of these identities (with the clarification that the biracial identities in *Ladivine* are the opposite of Marie NDiaye's own — a white French mother and a Senegalese father — but are partially reflective of the family of NDiaye and her husband, the French author Jean-Yves Cendrey). This

[51] *Autoportrait en vert* differs from the fictional *Ladivine*, but the two are more similar than title and genre might suggest and in ways which help unpack *Ladivine*. *Autoportrait en vert* is a self-portrait written for an autobiographical series but is fiction and fantasy; *Ladivine* is fiction but contains many autobiographical elements. I believe the genre fluidity of *Autoportrait en vert* supports readings of her fiction that acknowledge the autobiographical elements, especially in *Ladivine*, as autobiographical elements (Senegalese parents, single parenting, biculturenes/biracialness) are quite consistent throughout her collected works but not so all-present as in *Ladivine*.

is further complicated by the presence of the reader and narrator perceiving these identities. In an interpretation which proposes the perceiver with their background knowledge or lack thereof affects the identity of the subject (as in the conflict between Malinka with Ladivine Sylla and Clarisse with Richard Rivière), it is reasonable to find traces of NDiaye in her fiction. It is, however, important to remain cautious and avoid drawing direct parallels, even as we acknowledge potential similarities, to avoid replicating the interviews which prescriptively determine NDiaye's motivations and identity.

That said, and with the disclaimer that I do not seek to define *Ladivine* as an explicitly autobiographical novel, I believe *Ladivine* offers a response to the endless questions of identity posed to Marie NDiaye by demonstrating what it means to be doubted or judged on the basis of race and nationality, and the psychological effects of transforming, suppressing, or erasing the self and of not being allowed to know the self because it is in a constant state of being interpreted, meaning the subject's identity (or work) exists only as it is defined by others. NDiaye regularly affirms her Frenchness and her lack of knowledge about and connection to Senegal, having not visited until she was an adult. Ladivine Rivière has no connection to Africa, not knowing she is biracial and never having visited the country or met her grandmother, but she is nevertheless "recognized" as a local (despite being French), a (mis)identification that is adjacent to "recognizing" NDiaye as African (despite being French). However, Ladivine Rivière also recognizes the locals herself: she visits a market and "knows" a woman selling mango juice who she has never actually met before,[52] meaning her unknown and unexperienced heritage is a part of her.

[52] "Ses gestes mêmes, elle les reconnaissait, la manière précise dont la femme avait épluché le fruit puis taillé la chair au plus près du noyau tout cela, elle l'avait déjà rencontré exactement, ainsi que le haut front lisse, la bouche petite et noire, la joue barré d'une cicatrice épaisse, et le tee-shirt rouge délavé sous

I do believe there is value in examining NDiaye's works in the context of her life, especially given how frequently these connections are raised during interviews. I also propose the ndiayïenne destabilization of reality (the transformation into animals, the ghosts, the violence) serves to create a divide between NDiaye's reality and these fictional worlds, which can then draw from her lived experiences without being too overtly personal, and transcend an individual life. That is to say, if *Autoportrait en vert* is partially autobiographical and was written for a series of autobiographical texts, but nevertheless includes magic and extremely unclear references to NDiaye's life, it is not unreasonable to read NDiaye's fiction in a similar manner: autobiography and fiction that are equally ambiguous. NDiaye's books are scattered with references to her own life including mixed racial and national identity, being raised by a single parent, moving to Berlin, and connections to Africa and often specifically to Senegal. And while it is reasonable to find NDiaye in her fiction (I think she might even sometimes encourage it: as discussed in the introduction, *Un pas de chat sauvage* is intentionally misleading with regards to Marie/Maria/Marie), interpretations of NDiaye in her fiction can be just as telling about the reader as they are about the author. There is a tendency to assign too much meaning to connections between the self and fiction in the work of women writers because women are perceived as depicting a specific feminine experience and are often associated with memoir writing, whereas men writers depict a universal experience. This is due in part to simple privileging of works by white men authors (the literary canon), but it is also due to particularities of women and intersections of marginalized identities. *Ladivine* shows that a work can, of course, be both.

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lequel pointaient les seins allongés" (*Ladivine*, NDiaye 156).

Ladivine might be loosely based on NDiaye's own experiences but why shouldn't those experiences be universal? The implication of certain readings of *Marie NDiaye, the Francophone or African author* is that her work depicts an African immigrant experience (it does) and this experience is incompatible with a French experience (it is not). These characters *must* pass because a French Republican universalism rejects their very existence. *Ladivine* assigns great deal of importance to familiarity with family heritage and on the mother. The lack of emotional intimacy, and the discussions on silence and dialogue, demonstrate what occurs when it is either not possible or not desired to exist "authentically." In being questioned or doubted (or forced to pass or hide), the identity is silenced or erased. In regard to masculinity and violence, *Ladivine* suggests these topics and perceptions are gendered and racialized. Both the men and women in *Ladivine* face transformations, but while the women transform into dogs to escape from their social worlds, white men transform into violent forms of themselves that perpetuate the unequal and harmful structures of those social worlds from which the women are running.

Ladivine and Clarisse Rivière's deaths, psychological struggles, and transformations give us what seems to be a rather bleak interpretation of the potential to find and interpret the self. But taking into consideration Annika's connection with her mother *during* her childhood rather than *after* a tumultuous adulthood, and considering *Ladivine* within the context of NDiaye's works as a whole and particularly alongside *La Naufragée* and *Trois femmes puissantes*, I believe *Ladivine* offers a cautiously hopeful depiction of the search for belonging and the acceptance of failure and of escape, with the optimistic development that Annika might eventually transform to rejoin rather than reject her mother. There is also the simple fact of gaining mother-daughter relationships which could not exist while these women were human. And on a grander scale, *Ladivine* subtly shows the ways in which the stigma and class struggles of immigration affect

families: for example, Ladivine Sylla has only her daughter[53], and her daughter is resentful of this fact and of the extra lengths she must go to fit into their surrounding world, which results in estrangement from her mother and in some ways from her Ladivine Rivière, due to the "blankness" which inhabits Clarisse. And, in fairness, being the *only* connection of one's mother is a rather large burden for Clarisse to carry, especially when she knows her classmates will judge her because of this connection. Turning into a dog allows Clarisse to be a daughter in a way she could not as a girl who had to mature very young, and allows Ladivine Sylla to be a mother in a way Clarisse did not allow.

B. *La Promesse d'une clarté nouvelle* and *l'espoir de la retrouver*

In *Un pas de chat sauvage*, the narrator wonders "De quelle sorte était la misère dans laquelle, probablement, elle [Maria Martinez and also Marie Sachs] a fini? Les questions ne racontent que peu de choses. Mais elles dissent la crainte et l'effroi, l'inquiétude sans remède pour celle qui a disparu en temps et des lieux qu'on ne peut plus explorer dans l'espoir de la retrouver" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 42). The femme-poisson and Maria Martinez existed in solitude before their disappearance and are, in a way, both artists (/vocalists), and express themselves in ways Khady and Clarisse do not. Yet both are "captured" in visual art before vanishing and we are left with an impression as shared by another artist, both of whom admit to not being able to fully encapsulate their subjects. Khady and Clarisse return as animals, despite having certainly died, and return to people, with Khady visiting Lamine and Clarisse visiting her mother and daughter. Khady does not return to her family in Senegal, and Clarisse

[53] For an alternative depiction of this dynamic, we might remember Fanta and Djibril. Fanta does not immigrate alone, but Rudy is unhealthily jealous of Fanta's relationship with Djibril and of a similarity and bond they share which he cannot access (an implication they are closer because she is his mother, but also likely alluding to the fact that Djibril and Fanta are Black and Rudy is not). Djibril connects Fanta to the family she left behind and his relationship with Rudy is not superficially visible and is also rejected by Rudy's racist French mother.

is not recognized by Richard. There is, of course, a darkness to these metamorphoses — none of these women were able to experience *joie* as their human selves, and there is also very fact that they must transform (or die and are forced to transform). They do not communicate verbally but they are able to keep existing and are selectively perceived.

About the recurrence of certain topics in her works, NDiaye answers that these thematic consistencies indeed point to some relevance to her own life: "even if I didn't make that choice myself. I write from my own shortcomings, I'm not the kind of novelist who can wrangle with whole centuries and long genealogies" (Maurin). Not necessarily making the conscious decision to write about her own life and family "shortcomings" brings to mind the reluctant and defiant inheritance of the women in *Ladivine*. Even when they have not chosen to reveal themselves, their true selves (or other selves, as the original "true" identities continue to morph with each suppressed emotion) cannot help but manifest, just as the author's life is present to varying degrees in most of NDiaye's oeuvre. To return to the notion of the "fragilité psychologique," reading *Ladivine* alongside *La Naufragée* and *Trois femmes puissantes* suggests this fragility, combined with a search for meaning in that which is lost (to history, to erased memory, to the burden of existing in a world which does not support you) is a normal response to a violent world.

The artist of *La Naufragée* is not successful in his depiction of the femme-poisson because he does not seek to understand her, nor does he seek her trust. NDiaye's depictions, however, of the *trois femmes puissantes*, the femme-poisson, and of the *Ladivine* women who may reflect some of her own life experiences incorporate the author into the process of artistic depiction, resulting in work that is, I believe more ethical and more inviting. NDiaye — who was only seventeen when her first book (*Quant au riche avenir*) was published, has shared: "When I

was a teenager I hoped that literature […] would save me from an ordinary life, the humdrum everyday of a salaried job, or a marriage, etc. Real life made me anxious. Literature has allowed me to transform my profound maladjustment to the world into something socially acceptable and even gratifying because luckily for me, the gamble has paid off, and that could very easily not have been the case" (Maurin). NDiaye is speaking to escaping a "normal" career, but I believe also to the capacity of literature to transform the ordinary into something that is meaningful, despite its trials and injustice.

For the Sylla-Rivière family, there is freedom and power in *choosing* to escape a world which has rejected them and in finally seeing and being seen by (and in) one another. This also speaks to the aestheticization of trauma and pain: as the painter cannot translate the femme-poisson's song, NDiaye does not reduce the difference of the "other." She also acknowledges what cannot be known (and the limits of empathy): the recognitions that occur in each of these works are selective and only exist when the dominant, patriarchal, and oppressive world is abandoned. I use "abandon" and not "rejected" or "defeated" because there is ultimately no political or grander social victory for any of these characters, nor is there commentary on the systems which, for example, incite Clarisse to change her name and pass as white. NDiaye acknowledges what cannot be said and embraces the maladjusted, affirming there is a humanness to being destabilized and hurt by alterity and by violence, and a healing quality to the rebirth of return. With her strange, uncanny, and ambiguous narration and magic, NDiaye creates a world *just* strange enough to be unsettling but not unrecognizable, giving the reader the opportunity to perceive and be recognized in their own psychological fragility.

V. CONCLUSION
L'ÉTRANGÈRE LIBÉRÉE

"J'avais des scrupules, des effrois mystiques ainsi que des réticences féminines (broyer la vie d'une autre femme pour extraire quelle vérité sur celle de mes contemporaines." (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 13)

"Est-ce que ce n'est pas plutôt une morale plutôt qu'une leçon politique ? … Il me semble que les écrivains l'ont, quand ils sont intéressants. En fait, si ces gens fuient la misère, elle a une raison, elle est liée à des politiques, à des gouvernants, mais on peut aborder la question d'un point de vue individuel, peut-être plus que dans d'autres questions." (Interview with Marie NDiaye; Clair 29)

To address Marie NDiaye's most consistent themes (race, stigmatization, identity) risks reproducing the structures that harm her characters. To point out the unnerving media focus on her biography risks replicating the very discussions that problematically underscore her Senegalese ancestry at the expense of her French heritage and nationality. To discuss the rejection of potential autobiographical influences on her work is to disagree with her own understanding of her writing.[54] To use *Un pas de chat sauvage* as an exemplary text risks reproducing the issues inherent to an exhibition such as *Le Modèle noir*, as well as points raised in *Un pas de chat sauvage* (why is the researcher/reader so intrigued by Maria Martinez? Why is the reader so interested in NDiaye's biography?).

And there is, of course, the difficulty in reading Marie NDiaye, which I argue contributes to the application of her biography to her fiction, as the reader seeks details which do not exist in the works themselves. There is also the changing landscape of French race and identity

[54] And I do think there is something quite French to this approach to fictional engagement with identity and politics, resulting from and reflective of French universalism and also illustrating how non-white writers feel obligated to position themselves — and how the media and white audiences force such authors to self-define (these same questions are not typically posed to white men in such a way) — in order to be read as literary/universal. Writing this dissertation, I often thought about a 2019 interview with Leïla Slimani: "I'm a feminist, but I think that literature has nothing to do with ideology. In literature, you can decide to explore the soul of a woman who is not the kind of woman you want to be or the model that society should build. I hope that the reader will feel empathy and some compassion for her" (Marks). NDiaye's discussion of her work likewise suggests that empathy can be separate from ideology.

politics, which — despite affirmations that her writing is nonpolitical — mean that ideologically neutral readings of NDiaye's fiction are intrinsically inaccurate because these books, their readers, and their author do not exist in isolation.

I. *Du côté de la politique*

When asked in a 2021 interview about the influence of her *banlieue* childhood on her depictions of class, NDiaye denied the presence of intentional commentary in her work:

> I never think about class relations, in the sense that I never think about anything in particular while I'm working on a novel. What I mean by that is that I'm thinking of my characters, in what sort of situations I can place them, and, above all, about the moral issues they'll have to face, as opposed to the meaning these moral issues might have in contemporary society. I don't want any of my books to be described with words ending in '-ist', whether that be humanist, feminist, socialist… I can be all of those things as a citizen, but not as an artist. (Maurin)

In a 2009 interview titled "La Discrète empathie," NDiaye was asked about the evolution of her women characters: "de la femme-servitude de Hilda ou Rosie Carpe, à la femme libre de *Trois femmes puissantes*" (Clair 29). NDiaye responded: "il me semble évident qu'on doit, homme comme femme, absolument être du côté du féminisme. Je n'imagine pas du tout qu'un homme ou une femme digne d'intérêt ou d'affection puisse ne pas l'être. Ça me semble une condition essentielle à toute personne." The very premise of this second question, as well as the contrast in NDiaye's answers in each interview, illustrates the catch-22 of Marie NDiaye. If NDiaye does not claim to intentionally depict a certain class experience, when she wonders "in what sort of situations I can place them," these situations are nevertheless classed because that is the social framework of the world she draws from; and the reader either is *du côté du féminisme* (either is *d'affection*) or is not, and this will affect their interpretation of and engagement with the work. My three chapters moved through fictionalization of the historical; fictionalization of the contemporary; and fictionalization of the personal, in a discussion of the relationship between

the artist, the work, and the subject; the relationship between the reader, the text, and the subject; and the moral injury engendered by existing in these spaces.

My introduction presented these themes by examining the relationship between the consumer of art or the critic, Marie NDiaye, and her work in the novella *Un pas de chat sauvage*. My analysis of *La Naufragée* in chapter 1 discussed themes of images, museums, and historical erasure, and proposed that the depiction of the artist is as much a commentary on the capacity of a creator to occupy another's voice as it is on the way in which a work is received and conceptualized by a general public. My second chapter continued discussion of the ethical obligations of and limits to depicting the experience of the other by looking at *Trois femmes puissantes*. My third chapter discussed the effect of everyday and mundane violence as shown in *Ladivine* and the effects of such violence on the protagonists' psyches and relationships: assimilation in *Ladivine* as in *La Naufragée*, where walking on land nearly kills the femme-poisson is a sort of death of the soul.

There is a tendency to attribute the harm suffered by these characters to *other* systems and people of power. This was problematized in *Un pas de chat sauvage*, in which NDiaye encourages the museum-goer to reflect on the very notion of a "modèle noir" and on the capacity or incapacity of contemporary spectating to reform interpretations of these models. *Ladivine* demonstrates the limits to welcoming by depicting the psychological injury of identity suppression and assimilation and the generational, ongoing nature of this harm. There has been much written about NDiaye's productive empathy in her readers, but the greatest power in NDiaye's work is in its decision to *not* welcome the reader. The characters in these books, and in NDiaye's work more broadly, do not make amends with or apologize to the systems that have harmed them.

The women of *Trois femmes puissantes* are not truly *libres* – this is indeed the entire premise of the book. Norah, Fanta, and Khady are all trapped in a cycle of anti-immigrant policy and social bias. The freedom the *femme-servitude* lacks is certainly partially due to their class, but we can also consider Clarisse Rivière – daughter who "married up" to escape "la servante." Clarisse sacrifices personal intimacy in her suppression and fabrication of the self. No profession, nationality, or locale (Norah the French lawyer, Fanta the Senegalese schoolteacher, and Khady the African widow) saves the *trois femmes puissantes* from the harm they experience at an intimate and societal level. In *La Naufragée*, we find the most explicit demonstration of non-freedom in this dissertation's corpus, with the femme-poisson being unfree to participate in society because the world will not accommodate or accept her body and literally unfree after she is purchased at an allegorical slave market.

It is reasonable to ask about feminism in the context of *Trois femmes puissantes* because feminine *puissance* is inherently political in a patriarchal society. Khady Demba dies because of gender-based discrimination and violence. Single motherhood is political, given the unequal social power, financial solvency, and health and educational statuses of single mother households as compared to nuclear families. NDiaye's depictions of Black and/or migrant characters in Europe is inherently political, given the racism baked into French government and society, as well as contemporary manifestations of French colonization and history of enslavement (such as ongoing economic and political crises in Haiti which can be partly tied to French financial exploitation of Haiti, in addition to the generational trauma wrought by France's war against Haitian independence). It is reasonable to ask about race in NDiaye's catalogue because of the consistent theme of alterity that could coincide with racism. And in addition to being reasonable (and integral to understanding the work), the framing of such

analyses reveals as much about the reader as the work their critique draws on, in an instructional reflection of the reader's political framework.

We can consider a 2003 review of the play *Papa doit manger*[55] cited in my introduction: "Son phrasé subtil, plein de réminiscences africaines." Andrew Asibong notes that questions of race in *Papa doit manger* which "superficially revelled in by journalists, are far from irrelevant in discussions of this play: they merely need to be joined up to broader issues of psychopathology in order to be rendered at all worthy of politically engaged consideration" (*Blankness*, Asibong 127). One character is "aussi noire que peut l'être la peau humaine," and another character is white, but the meaning of "réminiscences africaines" is rather unclear (and the title is in fact a quote from Chekhov, and there are echoes of Racine's *Phèdre* in the play). NDiaye's works are political because they forcefully exhume the politics of her reader: is the dichotomy between Blackness and whiteness a "réminiscence africaine," despite the white character being French? Would there not also be a "réminiscence française"? Is there something about NDiaye's typically bare style (employed in *Papa doit manger*, which has no stage directions and has frequent extended monologues) that brings to mind a "réminiscence africaine"? Or is there something to be found in the changes to the Comédie française after *Papa doit manger* was adopted into its repertoire: "Vient alors la question cruciale: celle de l'engagement dans la troupe d'un acteur noir et de son avenir. Une révolution de taille dans la maison blanche" (Liban).[56]

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[55] *Papa doit manger* (2003) depicts Papa's return to his wife and two daughters after ten years of absence. Papa wins back Maman, who had been dating a literature teacher who is a leftist. Papa appears to have found great success in his absence, but had in fact been living in the same suburb with a girlfriend and her baby. Papa is Black and African and Maman is white and French, and the play contains some of NDiaye's most explicit depictions of race (Maman's boyfriend, for example, ponders what he considers the moral conundrum of hating a Black person), and many responses to the play focus on Papa's Africanness.

[56] Asibong writes: "Papa doit manger (2003) managed to smuggle a Black man, a mixed-race woman and

This effect is arguably heightened when the work is mediated through the interpretation of a cast and director, as in a theatrical production, without stage directions from NDiaye. André Engel, the director of the Comédie Française production described Papa as "un Noir, un Africain déraciné, ce qui donne au texte une résonance plus pathétique, plus tragique. […] Cet homme, ce Noir, cet Africain, incorrigible, irréformable, est abandonné par sa femme et renié par sa fille. Devons-nous y voir une allégorie du rapport qu'avec le temps, certains d'entre nous ont été amenés à entretenir avec ce qu'ils appelaient autrefois 'le jeune continent africain'" (Engel). *Papa doit manger* is political because of the society it is *performed* in and because of the readers, spectators, and collaborators it engages with.

Maria Martinez was a real person, an independent and celebrated singer; she was an actress playing a character at a slave market; she is an image in a museum; she is a fictional character in a 21st-century novella. JMW Turner's *The Slave Ship* engaged British abolition; it is an historical document depicting a true event; it is the "noblest sea" ever painted by man (Ruskin); it is an illustration to a 20th century French novella about a mermaid. *Ladivine* is a moving story about mothers who love their daughters so much they cannot bear to know or be known by them; it is a depiction of the incapacity to change or ignore identity in a postcolonial society with classist, racist, and sexist social hierarchies. *Trois femmes puissantes* is the story of three women and their families, who exist painfully and stridently despite a world that will not embrace them; it is a portrait of the endless crisis of immigration between Africa and France. These works are political because of the society they are read in, even if the scene it depicts is

two mixed-race girls onto the stage of the 323-year-old Comédie-Française within the context of one of the most bizarrely classical (and yet also baroque) French plays of recent times. What are the cultural implications of such publicly and spectacularly racialized representations of blank psychosis and abuse?" (*Blankness*, Asibong 111)

not necessarily politicized. That is to say: in the above quotations, Marie NDiaye affirms her artistic political neutrality, but the works are not neutral because they reflect society and the reader upon themselves, forcefully exhuming the politics of her reader.

II. *Une magicienne d'empathie/de pitié*

Empathy is frequently discussed in the context of Marie NDiaye (including the interview cited above: "La Discrète empathie"). A June 2022 article in *Le Figaro* titled "Pourquoi il faut relire *Trois femmes puissantes*" (by the writer Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt, a member of the Académie Goncourt, 2016-present) called Marie NDiaye "une magicienne d'empathie" (Schmitt). Schmitt proposes:

> Marie NDiaye change son lecteur, car elle attire son attention sur des complexités qu'il aurait ignorées sans elle. […]
> Marie NDiaye change son lecteur, car elle présente l'être en mouvement, jamais défini, jamais fini non plus. Quand le lecteur imagine avoir saisi à qui il a affaire, il rebondit de surprise en surprise, à l'unisson du protagoniste, lequel perce ses illusions […] *Voici une victime qui rompt avec son passé victimaire.*
> Marie NDiaye change son lecteur, car elle déconstruit les représentations grossières. […] Khady Demba, *la passive*, dévoile un courage tenace et bouleversant. En fermant son livre, nous nous sentons empêchés de condamner, de mépriser, de simplifier. *Y compris nous-mêmes.* Et l'on rit de ceux qui souhaiteraient enfermer l'écrivaine dans une case identitaire auteure métisse, auteure sénégalaise, auteure femme, auteure féministe , non qu'elle ne soit pas cela, mais elle est cela et plein d'autres choses encore, soit une auteure universelle.
> Marie NDiaye change son lecteur, car elle *se montre optimiste au sein d'une société pessimiste*. Emprunts du *tragique contemporain, impitoyables quant aux inégalités* et aux étranglements, ces récits haletants, cruels, parfois semeurs d'effroi, prouvent néanmoins qu'elle accorde crédit à une sorte de rédemption, rédemption par la force et la lucidité. […]
> Marie NDiaye change son lecteur, car elle croit en la dignité humaine. […] En un temps cynique, désabusé, où se vautrer dans le pire passe pour de l'intelligence, elle expose des diamants inattendus. Ses trois femmes puissantes, son homme puissant Rudy se débarrassent de ce qui salit et corrompt, parviennent à ne plus se duper […]. (Schmitt) (Italics my own)

With appreciation for Schmitt's uplifting of *Trois femmes puissantes*,[57] this article spotlights the ndiayïenne empathy dilemma in what I believe is an instructive misreading of the novel. Finding power, "la dignité humaine," and inspiration in these women is the acknowledgment that to live as they do is an inherent feat of strength because the world does not want them to survive. Given the French notion of universality, proposing a universality to NDiaye is a false problematic. Finding universality in these very specific depictions of alterity erases the cause of their suffering (being excluded from the "universal" experience) as well as different ways these stories will affect readers. Readers who have experienced the harm suffered by Norah, Fanta, and Khady will undoubtedly have a particular reading experience (as is true for readers who understand Rudy on a certain level).

These victims of state and intimate violence do not become non-victims: they disappear (the femme-poisson, Maria Martinez), they die (Khady, Clarisse), they lose their family (Ladivine Sylla, Annika), they turn into birds and dogs. Khady Demba was never "passive" she was an impoverished widow. And equivocating Rudy's *puissance* with that of the women is telling: Norah, Fanta, Khady are *puissantes* because they are forced to defy the insidious, hegemonic *puissance* manifested in Rudy (overt violence and racist microaggressions; white masculine Frenchness). And as Clarisse's *fragilité psychologique* demonstrates, it is not possible to break with the "passé victimaire," even after she rejects it and returns to her mother and her birth name. It is the world that must redeem itself not the *trois femmes puissantes*, and I think it is entirely fair to condemn the society that has harmed them *y compris nous-mêmes*.

[57] Though I must ask, as many have before, why *this* NDiaye? Norah and Fanta's stories are quite similar to her other novels, so to choose *Trois femmes puissantes* suggests a fascination with the more explicitly violent journey of Khady Demba. And while much attention to *Trois femmes puissantes* can be attributed to her Goncourt, it has been thirteen years since *Trois femmes puissantes* was published, and NDiaye has written many other celebrated texts in the interim.

Let us consider the expanse of time between Maria Martinez and Marie Sachs; between The Zong Massacre and the publication of *La Naufragée*; between *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) and a statement such as "There's a rise in communitarianism and delinquency. Foreigners are over-represented in criminal acts. It is therefore necessary to limit the influx of foreigners and facilitate their expulsion" (Eric Ciotti, Republican MP for the city of Nice, August 2022 [Corrasco]); the generations between Ladivine Sylla and Annika Berger; as well as the remarkable consistency of NDiaye's themes over the course of four decades. NDiaye's writing (particularly her intertextual works) underscore the subjectivity inherent in creating and engaging with a piece of art, the meaning of which is necessarily molded by the reader's politics and historical framework. Is ideological awareness an act of engagement?

III. Mundane Malice

There is a certain horror to NDiaye's work:[58] she consistently employs fantastical elements, and the transformations into animals can also bring to mind certain aspects of eco-fiction[59]. In horror fiction, there is an inherent malice to the world, sometimes manifested as fantastical beings (such as monsters), and characters and readers must contend with a universe that is antithetical to their existence. This begets psychological torment and a "flight or fight" reaction. In fantasy, there is an inherent human moral failing that must be overcome. Fantasy uses magical elements and often involves worldbuilding but not always, and fantasy in which the magical elements are mundane or normal can be described as "liminal fantasy"

[58] For example, the mysterious appearances of Wellington in *Ladivine*; and, though it is not discussed here, the potential cannibalism and ghosts of *Mon cœur à l'étroit*.

[59] Eco-fiction is a relatively new term for a genre (or themes and motifs) that can be traced to antiquity, though the term gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s in American comparative literature studies. In recent years, eco-fiction has come to be strongly associated with climate fiction, and this is relevant but not my specific framework. I reference eco-fiction as a genre encompassing relationships between humanity and nature and the effects of each on the other, as raised in my first chapter.

(Mendlesohn). It is especially interesting to consider the fantasy in NDiaye given that much fantasy literature uses magical identities as stand-ins for race in allegorical depictions of colonialism and alterity. That is to say, race is an integral beam in fantasy worldbuilding, but NDiaye does exactly the opposite and builds her worlds on its (false) absence, in an allegory for universalism. Eco-fiction (a very fluid and interdisciplinary genre) merges these themes: powerful nature, short-sighted and dominant humanity, and the repercussions of trying to overcome that which is inherent to the world.

I propose that NDiaye's work crosses horror (inherent malice), liminal fantasy (mundane magic), and eco-fiction (metamorphosis and a worldly or cultural memory), and that NDiaye subverts these genres and associated reader expectations by attributing the malevolence to humanity (i.e. it is a part of humanity and not an unexplained outward cruelty afflicting humanity); by not subscribing to a triumphant "good *vs* evil" fantasy dynamic (her characters are morally ambiguous, no one really wins, and the ostracized exceptional character typical of fantasy narratives does not exist); and by depicting an experience of "fight or flight" in which "flight" is the only possible conclusion, because the evil is blasé, internal, inevitable and because of careful narrative perspective, only the reader is fully aware of the evil occurring. NDiaye subverts the trust between the narrator and author (confusing elements of horror and fantasy) *as* the trust is established (information to which the characters are not privy), at the expense of autonomy of the protagonists, who are never fully aware of their family or cultural backgrounds: the femme-poisson who does not remember her past; the fraught relationships of *trois femmes puissantes* and their loose relation of which they are unaware (i.e. they are put into conversation with each other as *un roman*, as the cover says, but they are not an intimate family unit); the erasure of family history and race in *Ladivine*.

IV. Complacent Empathy

In *La Naufragée*, the femme-poisson tells us: "je dois abandonner tout espoir de faire prendre en considération, de faire seulement imaginer que je suis de la même espèce et constituée de la même chair souffrante et des mêmes pensées affolées que ceux qui me gardent là" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 41). Being "taken into consideration" is a helpful nuance to pity and/or empathy: the artist pities the femme-poisson when he sees her suffering, and later might be argued to empathize with her (suggested by his intense emotional response to her song), but he does not *consider* her life and needs. This brings to mind Brecht's theory of catharsis, which argues that collective catharsis risks creating complacency in the audience,[60] and that identifying with a character jeopardizes recognition of social injustice and critical self-reflection. Brecht employed "Verfremdungseffekt" (distancing effects, such as breaking the fourth wall[61]) in his own work to prevent the theatre-goer from becoming wholly immersed in a play.[62]

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[60] Similar to, I believe, Schmitt's reading of *Trois femmes puissantes*, which I (perhaps ungenerously) interpret as assigning intrinsic moral significance to an awareness of violence and privilege, and leans more toward pity than empathy.

[61] An interesting addition to discussions on NDiaye's theatre is the form of virtual plays, often performed on the web application Zoom (such as a 2021 performance of *Berlin mon garcon* by Princeton University's Troupe of L'Avant-Scène). Each actor performs dialogue (without stage directions from the author) in their own space, separated into independent boxes on the screen, in what is perhaps one of the purest examples of the "out of space and time" aspect of NDiaye's theatre. Not sharing a stage, the actors look into their webcams and directly address the spectator, who must extrapolate relations between these characters in a more extreme way than is needed when the characters are physically interacting on stage, creating a spatial dynamic in which the fourth wall appears broken from the very start of the production.

[62] We do not have the space or corpus foundation here to discuss these methods in NDiaye's theatre, but her strange theatrical writing almost certainly aligns with such methods: extended monologues, characters who exist entirely off stage (that is to say, in name only, spoken of by other characters but never seen), and a lack of stage direction and character descriptions. Spectators engage with the most distilled manifestation of NDiaye's typically spare dialogue, as interpreted by the theatrical troupe without guidance from the play's author, as NDiaye often does not include stage directions or character descriptions.

Marie NDiaye's novel(la)s employ uncertain and unsettling points of view which similarly force the reader to reevaluate and participate in the strange reality they are witnessing. There is a consistently opaque center of knowledge to which neither the reader nor the narrator is privy[63]: from where does the femme-poisson's knowledge of her ancestry originate, when she has forgotten her pre-Seine life? What do JMW Turner's paintings depict? Who is Wellington? There are the forgotten moments in *Un pas de chat sauvage*: "ce dont je ne me souvenais pas, et que j'étais allée ainsi sans réflexion, sans lucidité, contre mes règles habituelles de secret" (*Un pas de chat sauvage,* NDiaye 7); "si ne me gardais aucun souvenir de cette enquête…" (6). There are the questions posed to no one, with line breaks prevent the reader's total immersion by requiring us to consider the character's thoughts *alongside* the character, facilitating empathy or consideration over pity and guilt. This technique is particularly striking in third-person narrations, as the reader is unclear as to where the questions originate, but is also used in the first-person narrations of *La Naufragée* and *Un pas de chat sauvage*: "Qui était Maria Martinez, modèle de Nadar? [line break] Je l'ignorais" (14). And of course, if the narrator does not know *qui était Maria Martinez*, neither does the reader, seemingly ignoring the very premise of the book and forcing us to question its subject.

V. The Blank Reader

When NDiaye describes herself but not her work as feminist, it is not because the work is *not* feminist, but because an unnuanced or judgmental (or even pitying) reaction to these harmed characters is inherently demeaning, therefore the work is "neutrally feminist," so to speak, as this is the only reasonable reaction to it (to borrow a much-used and much-maligned

[63] Marie NDiaye has discussed such memory gaps, which are frequent in her work: "To begin with, I feel that that's how things are in life, that our memories are uncertain, that the ways we recall faces and things that people have said are unreliable. I exaggerate this feeling in my novels" (Maurin).

phrase from current media: there should not be *two sides* when reacting to the violent death of a migrant widow – but, of course, if we consider positions such as Eric Ciotti's, there are). The narrator of *Un pas de chat sauvage* notes her reticence in her project: "J'avais des scrupules, des effrois mystiques ainsi que des réticences féminines (broyer la vie d'une autre femme pour extraire quelle vérité sur celle de mes contemporaines" (*Un pas de chat* sauvage 13). And NDiaye will not facilitate such an act: to engage with her work is to implicate oneself in it, potentially at the expense of the protagonists. The narrative intimacy of these selected works gives the reader tools to understand history and themselves but this reflection is not mutually beneficial.

I argue the reader's empathy also risks *further* stigmatizing NDiaye's characters,[64] as I propose Schmitt does when he focuses on the victimhood of the *trois femmes puissantes* as opposed to the structures which victimize. We can return to Asibong's notion of blankness:

> NDiaye's blank-riddled surfaces can be used in all kinds of astonishing ways. People bring to their fantasies about these chopped-up tales and yanked-out characters a great deal from their own lived experience, prejudice and, perhaps, trauma. There is no universal reader. […] In my experience, all of NDiaye's usually obsessive admirers […] tend to speak as if her writing is being directed at them, as if they have been equipped with the gift of sensing what is 'really' going on beneath her enigmatic surface. […] A reader can never relate 'correctly' to any texts, much less to ones which veil themselves in blankness and paradox. […] it is precisely within these zones of seeming affectlessness, absence and invisibility that I suggest NDiaye's readers and spectators must actively insert themselves – even at the risk of delusion – and so begins the challenging process of bearing strange new psychic fruit within a spectral dwelling-space. (168-169)

As with all of Asibong's interpretations of NDiaye, I wholly agree with this analysis of NDiaye's engaged readership, particularly the effect of heterodiegetic narration on the reader's

[64] As Diana Holmes asks in *Middlebrow Matters*, "Is it ethically or politically acceptable to imagine her [Khady] inner life in a way that grants Western readers the pleasure of empathy – is this a form of neocolonial appropriation of her experience? And is it patronising and clichéd (the 'femme africaine, misérable et sublime') to attribute to Khady an invincible conviction of her own selfhood that survives trauma and even, symbolically, death? Do I have the right to be 'uplifted' by the imagined valour and resilience of a victim of the global inequality of which I myself am a beneficiary?" (Holmes 216).

individualized, personal connection with each work (and, as noted, believe the "NDiayean blank" contributes to the search for NDiaye in her own works). We can also apply this analysis to Schmitt's reading of *Trois femmes puissantes*: the reader with cultural capital and social power who uses NDiaye's works to note their respect for or awe of marginalized populations, finding in her words their fantasy of an experience that is not their own, with the strange effect that becoming aware of marginalization feels like a political act in and of itself (performative witnessing).[65]

VI. In A Maladjusted World

This project began in spring 2020, at the beginning of the ongoing pandemic. "We're all in this together" was adopted as social and political policy — as galvanizing as it was ephemeral. The experience of interacting with NDiaye's catalogue (its transhistorical point of view, its intertextual and collaborative nature, its "blankness") illustrates the limits of witnessing in creating a sustained, reciprocal engagement capable of transcending systemic individual marginalization. Schmitt describes an optimism "au sein d'une société pessimiste," and Diana Holmes notes the "'uplifting' quality" of Khady's story, which results from a "satisfying narrative form, a compassionate, enlightening perspective on a real contemporary phenomenon and the affirmation, through the story's heroine, of faith in life's value, even in the cruellest of situations" (Holmes 221). I often felt the very same sentiment while reading *Trois femmes*

[65] In a recent manifestation of this in the context of the US political and literary landscape, we might consider the sudden increase in sales of anti-racist books during the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, which were estimated to have grown by 2000%. Copies of books like *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo — an arguably problematic work in and of itself — almost immediately sold out, and backorders and reprintings were severely delayed due to the pandemic. Many bookstores reported that customers were furious about the delay. The owner of Semicolon Bookstore in Chicago said white customers (especially women) "would (literally) cry about the work they wanted to do on themselves but were completely uninterested in buying titles that were NOT trending" (Morgan). Some bookstore owners noted that customers did not even pick up backordered titles when they came in months after the protests began, their interest in anti-racism having waned.

puissantes, and Holmes also discuss the potential neocolonial appropriation in the experience reading Khady's story, and her analysis very thoughtfully considers Khady's tragedy. There is a sad irony in feeling empathy for and finding optimism for Khady Demba after witnessing her suffer so cruelly. If Khady experienced empathy and welcoming during her story, she would not need to affirm and perform her humanity for the reader.

The "tragique contemporain" (Schmitt) of Khady's story is that it is still relevant, and her society is not pessimistic – it is operating annihilatory systems. In 2009, Marie NDiaye won the Prix Goncourt for a book about violence suffered by migrants seeking refuge in France. In the same year, Marie NDiaye described the French President Nicolas Sarkozy's policies as "monstrous": "Je trouve détestable cette atmosphère de flicage, de vulgarité… Besson, Hortefeux, tous ces gens-là, je les trouve monstrueux" (*La Tribune des Antilles*). Former Vice President of the National Assembly Eric Raoult subsequently declared that NDiaye must "respecter la cohésion nationale et l'image" of France; "les déclarations de la romancière d'une rare violence sont peu respectueuses à l'égard de ministres de la République et plus encore du chef de l'État" (*C.J.*).

I conclude this project in September 2022. In 2018, the UN condemned the French President Emmanuel Macron's "regressive migration policies" and "inhumane and substandard conditions" for migrants. In 2020, French police conducted over 950 migrant/asylee eviction operations in Calais, seizing tents, sleeping bags, and blankets (Taylor). In 2021, approximately 2000 migrants were living in "wooded areas, in and around disused warehouses, and under bridges in and around Calais" without running water or electricity (L'Auberge des migrants: Human Rights Observers). During his 2022 election campaign, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed French language proficiency requirements for immigrants. A pet bird

evacuated from Afghanistan in 2021 has since been housed in the French Embassy: "Pet bird evacuated from Afghanistan says 'bonjour' to new life," reads the headline (*Agence French Presse*).[66] In 2022, Paris created a reception center and government- and NGO-funded network to welcome Ukrainian refugees.

In 1962, American White Citizens Councils conducted "reverse freedom rides" to protest liberal states, giving Black southern residents one-way bus tickets to northern cities on the pretense of jobs. Sixty years later, the governor of Florida chartered a plane using COVID relief funds to transport migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard, MA; they were welcomed by the city of Cape Cod, before being transferred to a military base and the National Guard (Friss and Coffey). In September 2021, the United States used Title 42[67] to rapidly expulse over 12,000 Haitian migrants from Texas in potentially "one of America's swiftest, large-scale expulsions of migrants or refugees in decades" (Lozano, Gay, Spagat, and Sanon). In summer 2022, the United States rapidly welcomed over 100,000 Ukrainian asylees, who were exempted from Title 42 and given an expedited path to permanent residency (Montoya-Galvez). In the first two weeks of September 2022, 33 million people were displaced and over 1,500 people died due to climate change-associated flooding in Pakistan (Mansoor), a country that produces less than 1% of global emissions (Ramirez and Dewan) (Ritchie, Roser, and Rosado). A call for the granting of

[66] "I tried a few minutes every day to teach him [French] words, starting with 'Bonjour,' but the thing is: Juji doesn't like men. He frowned at me and looked angrily, while he giggled at females. I went on trying hopelessly my daily "Bonjour" but sure enough he wouldn't listen. Or so I thought. Until one day, the (female) manager of the French residence sent me this 'Bonjour' that went straight to my heart. Today, from Paris, the bird's owner, 'Alia,' found me on Twitter. She was so happy to see her bird thus cared for. She wanted me to teach him French. Alia, your bird has become the embassy's mascot, but he is here for you, and if I can, I'll take him personally to you one day" (Twitter account of Xavier Chatel, French ambassador to the UAE). (@Xavier_Chatel_)

[67] Title 42, enacted under the Public Health Service Act of 1944, was implemented in March 2020 to expulse migrants who had been to a country with a communicable disease (COVID-19) without legal process.

Temporary Protective Status for Pakistani immigrants remained unanswered by the federal government as of September 2022. Thirty-five US states have laws or policies that penalize businesses calling for boycotts against Israel. In August 2022, forty-nine Palestinians (seventeen children) were killed in a two-day Israeli airstrike (Tanis). In spring 2022, the European Union, NATO, and most "liberal democracies" called for boycotts of and sanctions on Russia.

In 2022 the city of Chicago finalized plans for a $128 million police training "mini-city," including an empty city block, an empty six-story tower, and a building with empty classrooms, empty administrative offices, and an empty auditorium (Bamberg). The city of Chicago paid $67 million in police misconduct suits in 2021 (Goodie). Twenty counties in eighteen US states are using American Rescue Plan Act and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds to build and expand prisons (Valeeva, Li, and Cagle). In fall 2022, Jackson, Mississippi does not have potable water. The UK closed food banks and cancelled thousands of hospital appointments in September 2022 to commemorate the death of the Queen.

2,532 books were banned in school libraries in the US in 2021, the majority characterized by LGBTQ+ themes, characters of color, and depictions of racism (Friedman and Johnson). In the United States, hate crimes against Asian Americans rose 339% between 2020 and 2021 (Rios); anti-Semitic hate crimes rose 34% between 2020 and 2021 (Brangham and Wellford); 2020 saw the highest level of Anti-Black hate crimes since 2007 (Ross); anti-Muslim discrimination rose by 9% (Dress). Certain corners of the internet erupted with racism in fall 2022 because Disney's 2023 *The Little Mermaid* stars Halle Bailey, a Black actress and musician, as Ariel.[68] France

[68] In "Fear of the Black Hobbit," Adam Sewer writes, in an analysis of the politics of the art consumer (an interesting accompaniment to our consideration of the politics of the artist as opposed to the politics of their work): "Most people's tastes do not align neatly with their politics, and to the extent that people want such alignment, they typically just talk themselves into thinking the art they like shares their politics. This is not to say all political art or criticism is bad, or that popularity is by itself a measure of artistic merit. But weaving political themes into a story line, or evaluating a film or movie solely through the

continues to contend with Islamophobia, racism, and sexism, as facets of its government allege "wokisme" and "Islamo-gauchisme" threaten French universalism, with former Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer launching a think-tank to "combattre la 'cancel culture,'" (Daret) and respond to "idéologies, animées par des minorités activistes très organisées" (Blanquer), referring in part to the anti-racist collective Vérité pour Adama, who protested the 2016 death Adama Traoré, a Black man who died in police custody.[69]

Approximately 6,800 people (or 2.26 9/11s) died of COVID in the first two weeks of September 2022 (CDC), with 24-30 states still reporting data, depending on the day. In the third week of September, the US President declared "the pandemic is over" on *Sixty Minutes* (Pelley). On September 8, the governor of New York unveiled the public transit mask policy "You do you," a day before declaring a state of emergency due to polio and a week before temporarily discontinuing the state school COVID tracker. The director of the United States CDC

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prism of one's politics, is insufficient to make it brilliant or profound. Sometimes, in fact, doing so inadvertently exposes the shallowness of the art or the argument" (Sewer).

[69] These comments follow a growth in anti-racist movements in France in 2020, which many politicians attribute to an Americanization of French academic and racial politics. These fears predate 2020, but were exacerbated by the associations between anti-racist protests in France and Black Lives Matter protests in the United States. In June 2020, one week after George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, 20,000 demonstrators gathered in Paris to protest the 2016 death of Adama Traoré, who died in police custody. The timing was actually accidental: Adama Traoré's sister, Assa Traoré, and the Committee for Truth and Justice for Adama, had planned the protest prior to the murder of George Floyd. Nevertheless, politicians associated the acknowledgment of race in anti-racist protests to outside influence, minimizing violence suffered at the hands of French police. President Macron blamed universities: "The academic world is to blame. It has encouraged the ethnicization of the social question, thinking it was onto something. Now, the outlet can only be secessionist. That comes back to breaking the Republic in two" (quoted in Beaman and Fredette 5). Blanquer likewise described "An intellectual matrix coming from American universities and intersectional theses that want to essentialize communities and identities, which is the polar opposite of our Republican model that supposes equality between human beings, independent of their characteristics of origin, sex, religion. It is the breeding ground for a fragmentation of our society and a world view that converges with the interests of Islamists. This reality has especially plagued a significant portion of French social sciences" (quoted in Beaman and Fredette 5). In their article "The U.S./France Contrast Frame and Black Lives Matter in France," Jean Beaman and Jennifer Fredette note that French media described George Floyd as "Afro-American" but never noted the race of Adama Traoré, who was Black, despite associating the American and French social movements, reinforcing the idea that race and racism are external to France.

announced in January 2022 that "The overwhelming number of deaths […] are people who were unwell to begin with, and yes, really encouraging news in the context of Omicron. We're really encouraged by these results" (*Reuters*). In the United States, American Indian and Alaska Native, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders, and Black people were twice as likely to die from COVID as white people. In the United States, the average lifespan decreased by one year for non-Hispanic white people, but decreased by 6.6 years for Non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native people, 4.2 years for Hispanic people, and four years for non-Hispanic Black people (Hill and Artiga). Research shows that white Americans care less about the virus when made aware of these racial disparities (Skinner-Dorkenoo, Allison L., et al.). 22.3% of people in low-income countries have received a COVID vaccine dose as of fall 2022 (Ritchie, Mathieu, et al.) and the developing world accounts for 85% of global excess pandemic deaths (Schellekens).

26% of American adults were disabled and 51.8% of Americans adults had a chronic illness pre-pandemic (CDC). By spring 2022, nearly every space in most western nations had discontinued mask requirements at the exclusion of and/or harm to millions of disabled and/or high-risk people. During the early pandemic in the UK, learning-disabled people were eight times more likely to die of COVID (Williamson et al.). In Canada, disabled people denied or awaiting public housing and medical benefits are applying for medically assisted suicide after an expansion to the country's right-to-die laws, about which the Parliamentary Budget Officer noted a net savings because healthcare for the chronically ill is expensive but assisted suicide is $2,327 per case (Bernier et al.).

In this dissertation, I have discussed how incapacity to inhabit identity causes psychological damage to the politically and socially marginalized individual, who must contend

with rejection but who cannot acknowledge or necessarily even understand this rejection because it is silent. The production of empathy without agency, implicates the reader who witnesses this psychological damage and must contend with the barriers to subverting the structures which define and maintain alterity. Much is made of NDiaye's harsh and cold stories, but while inarguably tragic Khady Demba's story is not atypical, and neither are NDiaye's depictions of microaggressions and the psychological damage engendered by assimilation into a society that seeks to harm you.

It is often the most marginalized who are tasked with educating those who reject them: forced to engender empathy, shape systems, and beg that identities decreed antithetical to society be accommodated. Stigmatized individuals must profess and justify their personhood to gain access to a world that has denied it, but empathy predicated on compelled vulnerability is a form of harm. NDiaye does not ask this of her characters, nor does she force them to assimilate. Khady, for example, affirms her humanity *to herself* not in argument to the people around her who would (and do) let her die. The *Ladivine* women ultimately stop changing themselves to fit the world, and decide to escape it; Richard does not recognize Clarisse (despite claiming he would) because she does not expose herself to him, and has ceased self-sacrificing for the benefit of the authoritative culture and identity. The *femme-poisson* does not continue hoping the artist will understand her, finally believe she is equal, and set her free she forces her own escape.

VII. On "-Ist"s

An intimacy of alterity implies an intimacy of authority, and a dogmatic comfort to be found in merely acknowledging harm. Who deserves empathy, and who is qualified to say? A quick scan of reviews about her books will find frequent use of words like cruel, malevolent,

monstrous, unjust, unsettling, and violent. With acknowledgment that my reading of Marie NDiaye is quite grounded in "-ist" words because there is ideology in existing, NDiaye's writing is particularly salient at depicting the contemporary moment because she does exactly *not* that, instead acting as a funhouse mirror to *ongoing* harm (subject to natural limitations, with NDiaye's work and my interpretation of it inhabiting a specific geographical and national posture).

Mistreatment is not acknowledged by offenders in hindsight in evidence of growth, but in the very moment it is occurring. The cruelty in NDiaye's books is both systemic and personal, and manifests at an intimate level, sometimes between individuals of a same marginalized identity and sometimes by more powerful individuals who nevertheless acknowledge they know better. Rudy, the artist, Clarisse, and Lamine all acknowledge the harm they cause *as* they are causing it, but they persist. Likewise, awareness of injustice and knowing they are guiltless does not prevent psychological and emotional injury in wounded characters, as we see in the relationship between Norah and her father. A corrupted intimacy between the reader and protagonist creates empathy *and* intentionally hinders it, in a marred simulacrum of the unequal systems that damage the characters (and the writer, and the reader), problematizing the notion of community. To recognize the violence suffered by these characters requires conceding not just the violence that exists in the world, but the miserable grief of witnessing, the impossibility of perceiving it all, and our complicit acceptance (*y compris moi-même*).

VIII. *Fè an pat chat mawon*

Marie NDiaye describes her central topic as "the moral issues they'll [her characters] have to face, as opposed to the meaning these moral issues might have in contemporary society" (Maurin). And later in the interview: "I still believe the novel to be the most liberating form of

all: think of the number of characters, the shifts in time, the manipulations of the reader that are possible."[70]

> *Pourquoi, alors, souffrir encore pour elle ? Quelle justice lui rendez-vous si tant est qu'on en ait manqué à son égard ?* […]
> *De quelle sorte était la misère dans quelle, probablement, elle a fini ?*
> Les questions ne racontent que peu de choses.
> Mais elles disent la crainte et l'effroi, l'inquiétude sans remède pour celle qui a disparu en des temps et des lieux qu'on ne peut plus explorer dans l'espoir de la retrouver.
> On voudrait, ô combien, la prendre dans nos bras, la protéger, cette femme vaillante et, sans doute, d'une façon ou d'une autre, malmenée, spoliée.
> On n'étreint que sa propre vision, cela ne nous réchauffe pas c'est à couver de sa solitude que survit le chat sauvage. (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 41-42)

Is there purpose to suffering and empathy if they do not beget justice?

> […] plus sa musique se faisait ardente et allègre, plus l'infinie tristesse de la situation m'incommodait ce troquet, ce quartier, l'odeur de l'échec, des attentes illusoires, je me sentais au bord les larmes.
> N'avais-je pas, moi aussi, si même de manière plus subtile, raté ma vie ?
> Mais quelle importance, quand on ne souffre pas trop, de la rater ou de la réussir ? (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 38)

With questions posed to her audience from a "je" who is not NDiaye herself, the reader becomes a part of the story. Empathy for Maria Martinez is a byproduct of and *cause for* embracing solitude.

> "Je suis restée des heures durant devant l'ordinateur à tender de pénétrer certains mystères, de voir soudain ce qui m'était caché et sans la connaissance de quoi il me semble alors que *je ne pourrais m'endormir, que je ne pourrais plus jamais m'endormir.* " (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 6)

> "[…] les humains se laissent attirer par notre voix au-delà de toute raison. […] Me revient le souvenir d'histoires anciennes, […] d'où provient le chant auquel *je ne vois pas de fin.* " (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 33) (Italics my own)

[70] On theatre, NDiaye noted "I wouldn't say that I have an appetite for the theatre, since all the plays I've written have been commissioned, whether that be by a director (the most common occurrence) or by an actor, like when Nicole Garcia approached me. I've never actually written a play for myself, in contrast to my novels, which no one has ever asked for. […] sometimes I have the feeling that the characters in my plays are more like sketches than beings, that they lack the kind of reality I love discovering in my novels" (Maurin).

We have discussed the political and moral implications and applications of NDiaye's writing, and I would like to conclude by reflecting on the satisfaction of reading NDiaye. There is no escaping the "maladjusted world"[71] once one becomes conscious of it, but neither is it possible to fully embrace and inhabit such a world after witnessing its cruelty. In her commentary on *Trois femmes puissantes*, Diana Holmes proposes that "what academic criticism can easily ignore is the sheer joy of fiction's power to send us travelling through time and space, beyond the frontiers of our own individual consciousness and into the mind and heart of another" (Holmes 222). We witness harm, and must passively accept what is occurring. We internalize their pain and reflect our own upon it.[72] Lamine only reaches Paris because of Khady, stealing the small sum she earned while being forcibly prostituted. *Trois femmes puissantes* ends with his perspective: "Chaque fois qu'on donnait de l'argent à Lamine en échange de son travail [...] il pensait à la fille, il l'implorait muettement de lui pardonner et de ne pas le poursuivre d'exécrations ou de songes empoisonnés" (*Trois femmes puissance*, NDiaye 316-317). We witness those who wreak harm, such as Rudy and the artist; as well as to the morally ambiguous victimized-victimizer, such as Lamine, who inadvertently contributes to Khady's death but who has little agency or opportunity of his own. Potentially acting as a stand-in for the reader, Lamine is both a victim and perpetrator of violence, enacting upon Khady the very harm he sought to escape — and he knows this, and he feels guilt, but the sacrificed cannot forgive.

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[71] "When I was a teenager I hoped that literature, whether that be literature I was reading or writing, would save me from an ordinary life, the humdrum everyday of a salaried job, or a marriage, etc. Real life made me anxious. Literature has allowed me to transform my profound maladjustment to the world into something socially acceptable and even gratifying — because luckily for me, the gamble has paid off, and that could very easily not have been the case" (Maurin).

[72] For further reading, I must again highlight Andrew Asibong's excellent *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* which — reflecting his training as a professional psychotherapist — provides a thoughtful and engaged analysis of NDiaye's most fervent readers and the consistent inclination to project the self into her work (this includes academic analyses of her writing, as Asibong does himself in this book).

"Pourquoi, alors, souffrir encore pour elle?" (*Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 41). Because, in an interpretation of the world that is as courageous and as it is damning, even if we *ne voyons pas de fin* to the infinite *tristesse*, and even if empathy and catharsis do not enact the political change they should intrinsically encourage, suffering need not be in solitude and neither should we forget those who do not or cannot survive. The proverb "Fè an pat chat mawon" (*un pas de chat sauvage*) can also mean "to make a getaway."

> "Il faut prendre une décision, mais de quelle nature et tendant vers quoi? […] Où aller et de quelle façon? […] Puis un instant d'oubli et mes yeux s'ouvrent malgré moi: la lueur de l'aube à peine voilée d'une brume d'émail, déjà la promesse rouge du soleil d'été loin là-bas sur l'eau grise. […] *Tout le reste envahi d'incertitude* […]" (*La Naufragée*, NDiaye 7-9).

As the Sylla-Rivière women transform into dogs, as the femme-poisson escapes the artist, and as the *trois femmes puissantes* embody birds, reading Marie NDiaye provides an escape to the reader (and the artist[73]) who requires it in not ignoring the cruel world, but instead submerging more profoundly within it. *Nos yeux s'ouvrent malgré nous*: if NDiaye's heroines cannot be saved, may they (and we) be liberated.

[73] Another strange escape: in 1841, JMW Turner, who became increasingly misanthropic as he aged, rowed a small boat into the middle of the Thames so he wouldn't be counted in the yearly census.

Figure 4: JMW Turner, *Quillebeuf, Mouth of the Seine* (detail) (1833) (from *La Naufragée*, NDiaye 54)
SOURCE: Reprinted in *La Naufragée* by Marie NDiaye; painting held at Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

"[…] il [Lamine] dormait sur son argent et rêvait de la fille [Khady Demba]. Elle le protégeait ou, au contraire, le vouait au pire. Et quand, à certaines heures ensoleillées, il levait son visage, l'offrait à la chaleur, il n'était pas rare qu'un demi-jour tombât soudain inexplicable, et alors il parlait à la fille et doucement lui racontait ce qu'il advenait de lui, il lui rendait grâce, un oiseau disparaissait au loin." (*Trois femmes puissantes*, NDiaye 317)

APPENDIX A
INTRODUCTION

Figure 5, "D'après un daguerreotype de Warren T. Thompson, *Maria Martinez, la 'Malibran noire,'*" (approximately 1852)
SOURCE: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (from *La Naufragée*, NDiaye 44)

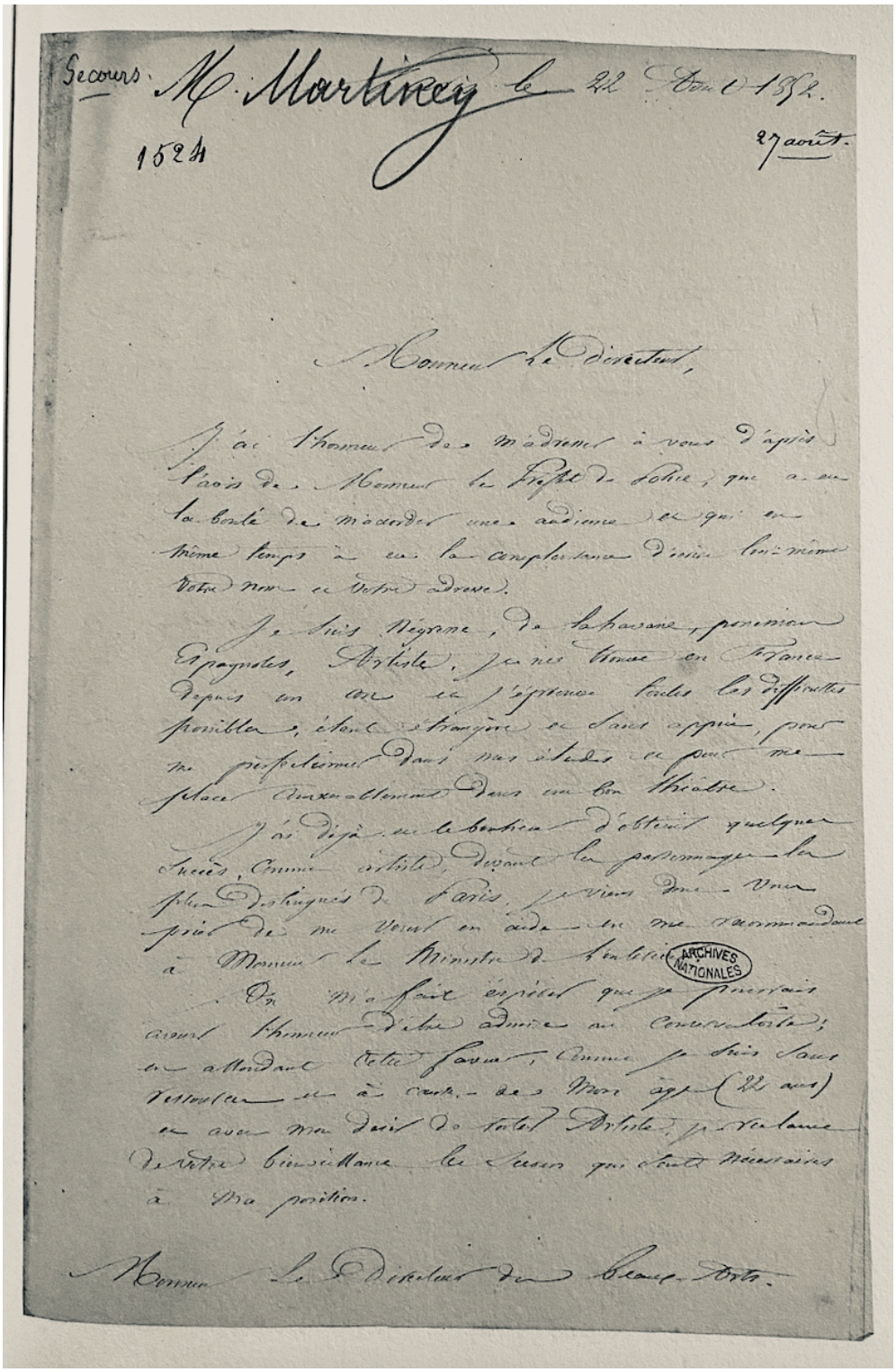


Figure 6, "Demande de secours de Maria Martinez à M. le directeur des Beaux-Arts" (1852)
SOURCE: Archives nationales, Paris (from *Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 45)

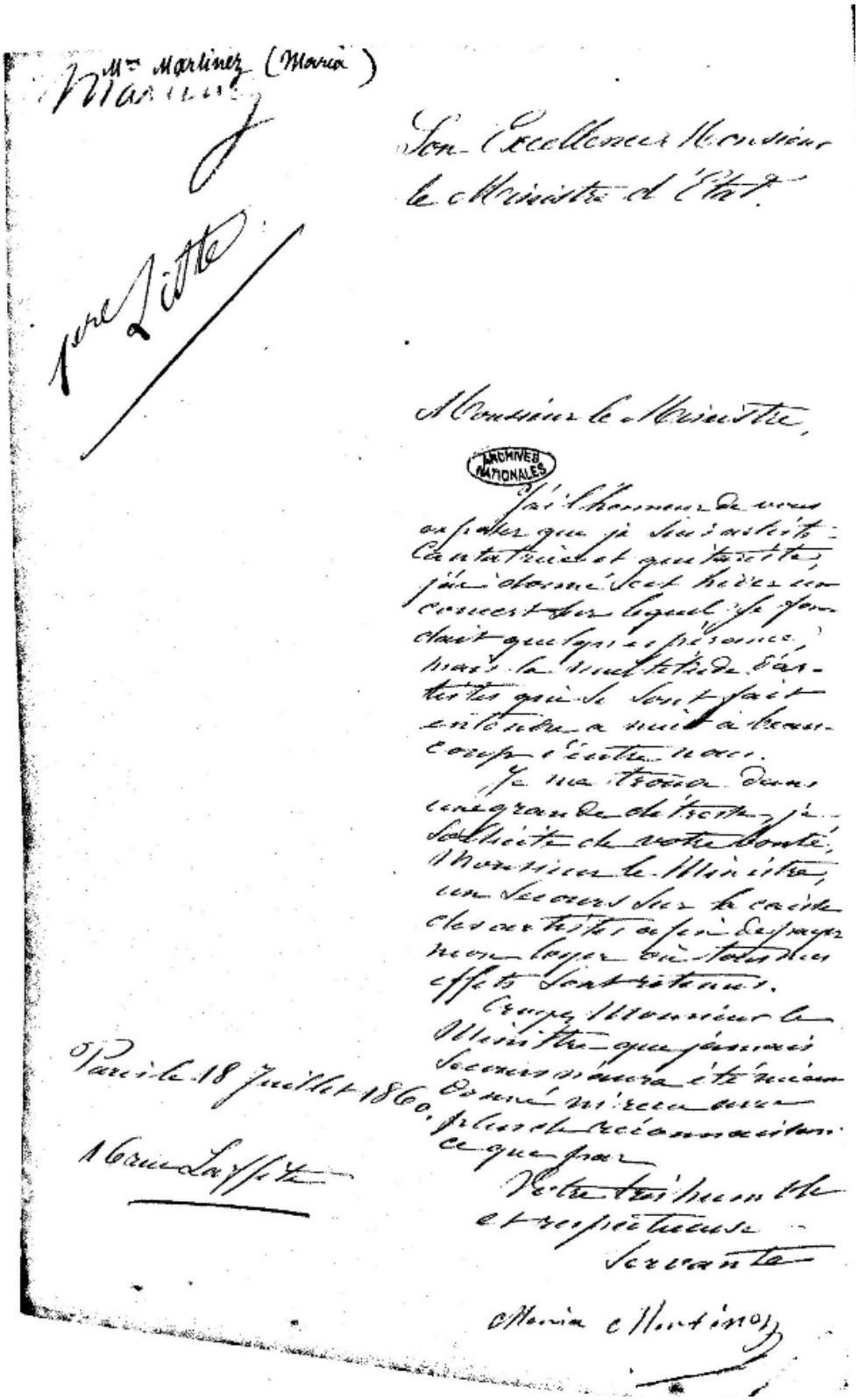


Figure 7, "Demande de secours de Maria Martinez à Camille Doucet, directeur de la division des Théâtres" (1850)
SOURCE: Archives nationales, Paris (from *Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 46)

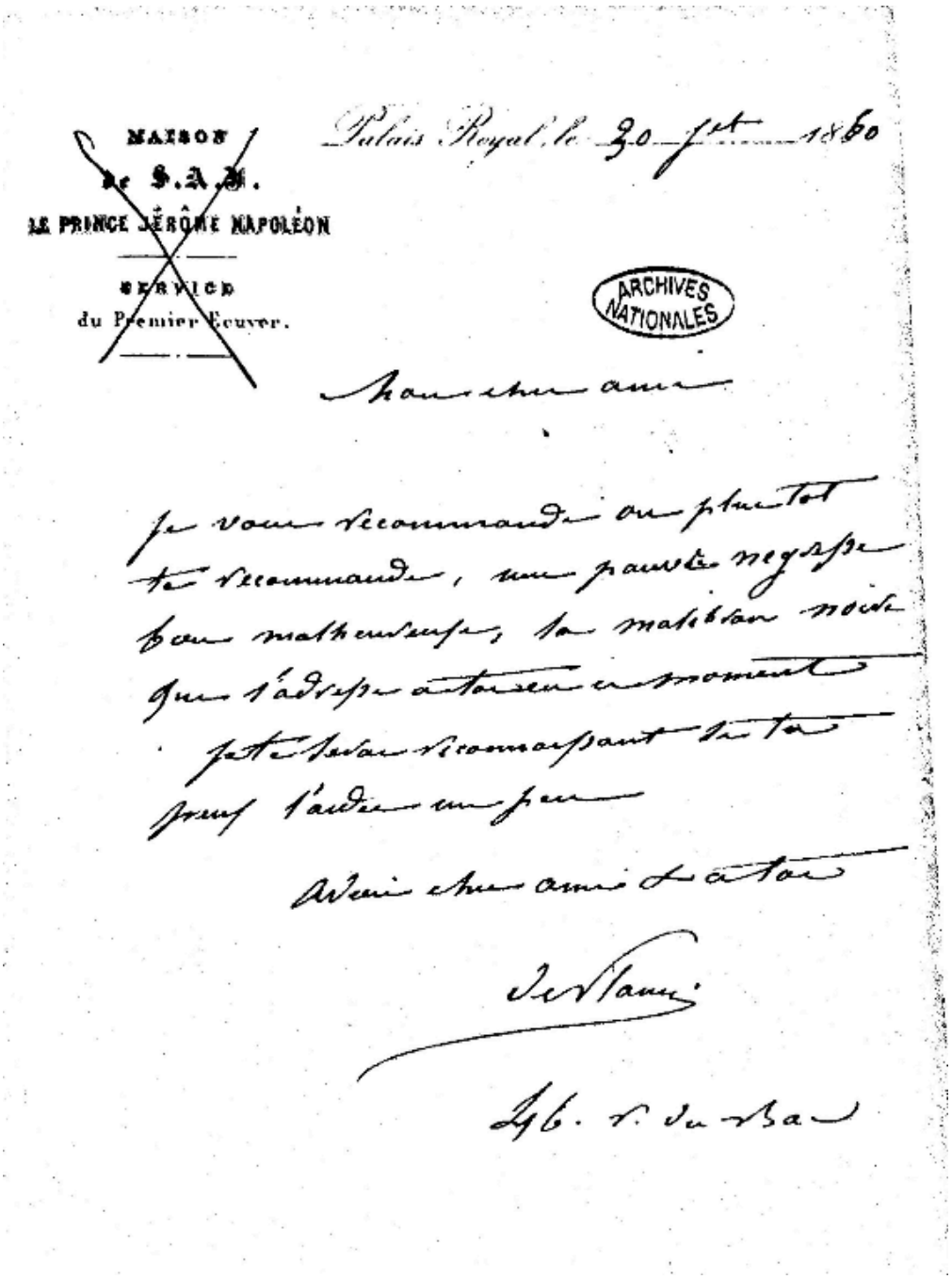


Figure 8, "Dossier de Demande de secours de Maria Martinez: letter d'Auguste-Charles Godard Aucour à Camille Doucet, directeur de la division des Théâtres, ministère d'État de l'Instruction publiqe et des Cultes/division des Théâtres," 1860
SOURCE: Archives nationales, Paris (from *Un pas de chat sauvage*, NDiaye 47)

PERSONNAGES.

Abou-Kasar, sultan de Bagdad.....	MM.	Mutée.
Kalabalik, capitaine des gardes.....		Jeault.
Moutonnet, amant de Palmyre.....		Kopp.
Un marchand d'esclaves.....		Gautier.
Palmyre, modiste de Paris.....	Mmes	Boisgontier.
Mariquita, négresse.....		Martinez.
La Sultane, personnage muet.....		Héléna.

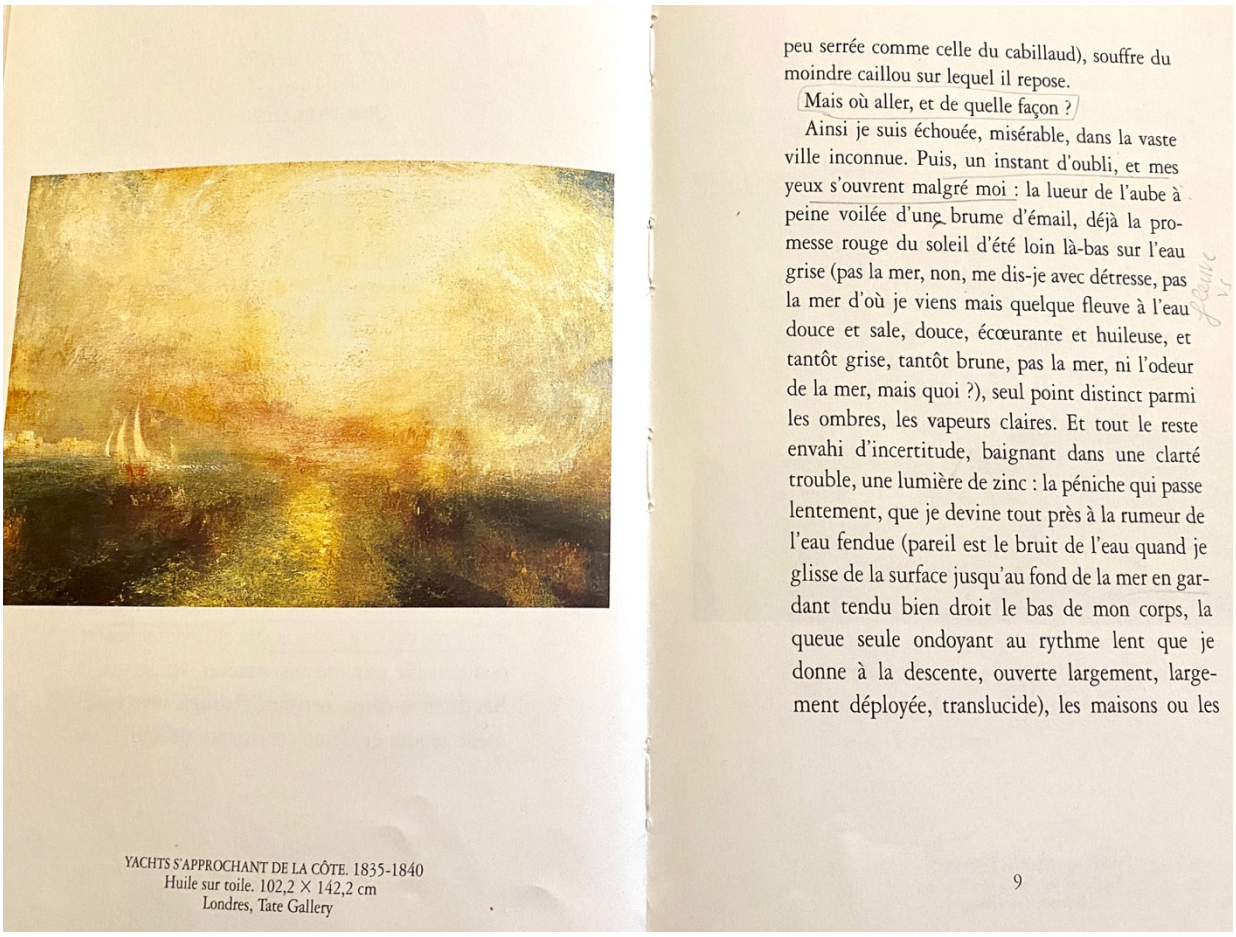
Femmes, esclaves, suite du sultan, etc.

Figure 9, Cast list from *La Négresse et le pacha* (Spoelberch 561)
SOURCE: *Histoire Des Oeuvres De Théophile Gautier* by Charles Spoelberch de Lovenjoul

Figure 10, Cover of *Un pas de chat sauvage*
SOURCE: *Un pas de chat sauvage* by Marie NDiaye

Figure 11, Photo of "Le Modèle Noir" exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay
SOURCE: *ecrireiciaussi.canalblog.com*

APPENDIX B
CHAPTER 1



YACHTS S'APPROCHANT DE LA CÔTE. 1835-1840
Huile sur toile. 102,2 × 142,2 cm
Londres, Tate Gallery

peu serrée comme celle du cabillaud), souffre du moindre caillou sur lequel il repose.

Mais où aller, et de quelle façon ?

Ainsi je suis échouée, misérable, dans la vaste ville inconnue. Puis, un instant d'oubli, et mes yeux s'ouvrent malgré moi : la lueur de l'aube à peine voilée d'une brume d'émail, déjà la promesse rouge du soleil d'été loin là-bas sur l'eau grise (pas la mer, non, me dis-je avec détresse, pas la mer d'où je viens mais quelque fleuve à l'eau douce et sale, douce, écœurante et huileuse, et tantôt grise, tantôt brune, pas la mer, ni l'odeur de la mer, mais quoi ?), seul point distinct parmi les ombres, les vapeurs claires. Et tout le reste envahi d'incertitude, baignant dans une clarté trouble, une lumière de zinc : la péniche qui passe lentement, que je devine tout près à la rumeur de l'eau fendue (pareil est le bruit de l'eau quand je glisse de la surface jusqu'au fond de la mer en gardant tendu bien droit le bas de mon corps, la queue seule ondoyant au rythme lent que je donne à la descente, ouverte largement, largement déployée, translucide), les maisons ou les

9

Figure 12, *Yachts Approaching the Coast* (from *La Naufragée*, NDiaye 8-9)
SOURCE: Reprinted in *La Naufragée* by Marie NDiaye; painting held at the Tate Britain, London

Figure 13: *Yachts Approaching the Coast*, JMW Turner (1835)
SOURCE: Tate Britain, London

Figure 14: *Rising Sun in the Haze*, JMW Turner (1807)
SOURCE: National Gallery, London

Figure 15: Detail from *Rising Sun in the Haze*, JMW Turner (1807) (from *La Naufragée*, NDiaye 42)
SOURCE: Reprinted in *La Naufragée* by Marie NDiaye; painting held at National Gallery, London

Figure 16: *The Slave Ship*, JMW Turner (1840)
SOURCE: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 17: *The Slave Ship* (detail); *La Naufragée*, NDiaye 32
SOURCE: Reprinted in *La Naufragée* by Marie NDiaye; painting held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 18: *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, JMW Turner (1834)
SOURCE: The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Figure 19: *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, JMW Turner (alternate version) (1834)
SOURCE: The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

Figure 20: *Norham Castle*, *Sunrise*, JMW Turner (1845)
SOURCE: Tate Britain, London

Figure 21: *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, JMW Turner (1798)
SOURCE: The Collection of the Late Professor Luke Herrmann

Figure 22: *Norham Castle on the River Tweed*, JMW Turner (1816)
SOURCE: Tate Britain, London

Examples of Other Sirens

Figure 23: *Mami Wata* by Zoumana Sane (1987)
SOURCE: Collection of Herbert M. and Shelley Cole, courtesy of the Fowler Museum at UCLA and published in the online exhibition for "Mami Wata" by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

Figure 24: *Dona Fish* by Ovimbundu peoples (1950s-1960s)
SOURCE: Private Collection, courtesy of the Fowler Museum at UCLA and published in the online exhibition for "Mami Wata" by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

Figure 25: Sirens tempting Ulysses, artist unknown (480 BCE)
SOURCE: Encyclopædia Britannica

Figure 26: *Haitian Sirène: Mambo, la Sirène*, Jacques Dorcé
SOURCE: From the collection of Jonathan Cheek, *Sirenology & Haitian Art*

Figure 27: *Lasirene-marassas trois (Lasirèn-Twins [and the One Who Follows the Twins Making Three])*, by Roudy Azor (2006)
SOURCE: Private Collection, courtesy of the Fowler Museum at UCLA and published in the online exhibition for "Mami Wata" by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

Figure 28: *Aida Webo* (Rainbow Siren)
SOURCE: From the collection of Jonathan Cheek, *Sirenology & Haitian Art*

Figure 29: "Zong #1," M. NourbeSe Philip
(*SOURCE*: *Fracture*, vol. 2)

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preservation
rest
action policy insurance value
slaves overboard
want water
declaration
perils seas currents
misfortunes
voyageboardshipvoyageboardship
arrival Jamaica
quantity water
board ship lives
master mariners ship
slaves residue voyage arrival
ship Jamaica
day arrival
ship Jamaica days
day arrival ship Jamaica
negroes want water
sustenance
want water
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