AGAINST AUTOBIOGRAPHY
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Acknowledgments

The “eureka” moment of this book may be traced to a snow day in Cambridge, Massachusetts, circa 2001. The nor’easter that paralyzed the city and forced the cancellation of that day’s graduate seminar had the fortuitous consequence of affording me precious extra hours to finish reading *La Statue de sel*. At the end of that afternoon, I closed Albert Memmi’s first novel with a glimmer of what would—much later—become my own first book.

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Introduction

To some, no sooner had francophone literature won its place in the seminar rooms of university French departments than the idea of a single, monolithic vision of a literature written in French by former colonial subjects was called into question and francophonie, as a literary category, found itself parceled out into regional subfields ranging from the Antilles to West Africa and from the Maghreb to the Indian Ocean. To others, incorporating extra-metropolitan French-language literature into a broader French-literature curriculum remains both a practical and an intellectual challenge. Institutional vagaries notwithstanding, Maghrebi literature in French has begun to come into its own as a distinct academic subfield, as evidenced by the steady volume of scholarship that its study has generated. One cannot help but notice, however, that criticism of Maghrebi literature has not managed to divest itself of a certain cult of personality when it comes to its authors. Works by Tunisian Albert Memmi, Moroccan Driss Chraïbi, and Algerians Mouloud Feraoun and Mouloud Mammeri, to name only a few, are often understood as thinly veiled autobiographies, with critics assuming an indexical relationship between author and narrator, placing significant emphasis on the texts’ ethnographic features and realism, and calling unproblematically upon the author’s own statements about his or her work as a basis for interpretation.

Of course, innovative theoretical approaches have certainly been brought to bear on this corpus of primary material, and my goal is neither to essentialize the totality of the critical production on the Maghrebi novel in French nor to turn a blind eye to the various evolutions in criticism. However, this tendency toward autobio-
graphical reading remains a peculiar one given that francophone Maghrebi literature emerged during an era that witnessed the baptism of the intentional fallacy by the partisans of New Criticism and the rise of “high theory,” its concomitant dissolution of man, deconstruction of text, and death of the author. The curious scholar is forced to wonder whether francophone Maghrebi cultural productions have become victims of a kind of critical jet lag, seemingly stuck “behind the times” and rarely parsed in terms of their innovative and often subversive textual strategies.

In the particular case of Albert Memmi, a substantial portion of the scholarship devoted to his oeuvre is built upon the notion that his literary production is autobiographical or “autographic.” Such readings, however, disregard the absence of discursive or paratextual elements that would signal a straightforward autobiographical operation. (It is worth noting, for example, that not a single character in Memmi’s six novels bears the author’s name.) Memmi’s essays, which often stage in theoretical terms the philosophical or existential problems posed in his novels, also fail to provide a coherent, consistent portrait of their author. In spite of evidence that a more complex set of operations is at stake, critics have pressed Memmi’s personal narrative into the service of literary interpretation, using his life story to explain his literature and thus limiting its analytical possibilities. Such treatment is all the more perplexing when compared with the types of practices mobilized in the interpretation of metropolitan French literature of the same period, where criticism generally accounts for the complexity of first-person narratives (be they categorized as novels or autobiographies) and strives to negotiate their idiosyncrasies and even to highlight their ambiguities as signs of textual innovation. Such work has produced original analyses and myriad neologisms such as autofiction, autography, and autoportraiture in an attempt to account for variance within an ever more broadly conceived genre. Unlike the relatively capacious construal of autobiography mobilized within the metropolitan space, Memmi’s work, like that
of other francophone writers of North Africa, has found itself subject to a near foreclosure of interpretative possibilities.

Notwithstanding its admittedly pugnacious title, Against Autobiography does not seek to demonize the genre of autobiography. To the contrary, under pressure in this study is not autobiography as a form of writing but rather its deployment as an interpretative lens or reading strategy. Such practices, which continually return us to questions of the author’s intention, illuminate neither the works they interpret nor the genre of autobiography itself in its complex, protean nature. Further, they do not account for a whole raft of textual possibilities such as generic ambiguity, hybridity, and subterfuge. In addition to its failure to conceive of certain texts as something other than autobiography, criticism of works by Maghrebi writers has often been unwilling or unable to account for autobiography's potential to function as a discursive strategy capable of multiple forms of subversion. A sustained engagement with Memmi’s work is a tactical choice insofar as it provides an ideal laboratory in which to hone different strategies for reading and interpreting a body of textual material that has consistently shuttled back and forth between fiction and nonfiction and that contains within it a critique of reading for biographical material alone.

Rather than cast aspersions on critical works that have come before it, Against Autobiography seeks to unpack the existence of such autobiographical criticism as a perhaps natural, if not inevitable, symptom of a greater problem that has plagued francophone Maghrebi writing since its arrival on the literary scene, namely, its difficulty in finding a natural home as an object of study in literature departments of French universities. Ferried between departments of French and comparative literature, the works of North African francophone authors have been slow to gain an institutional foothold in universities in France. To a certain extent, and not without irony, Memmi’s own career as a cultural sociologist and the part he played in introducing francophone Maghrebi works
into the French academy—specifically through the creation of a trio of anthologies devoted to Maghrebi literature in French—may have contributed to this phenomenon.

Once the concept of autobiography as interpretative filter is removed, however, and autobiography itself is reconceived as a textual strategy, Memmi’s corpus of essays, novels, prefaces, personal récits, and interviews can be understood not in terms of their author’s intentions but rather as a repository of textual intentions that contain within them embedded theoretical discourses. These discourses, furthermore, are by no means confined to questions of autobiography and authorial intention; rather, they are indicative of multiple points of contact between Memmi’s oeuvre and several of the major epistemological shifts associated with cultural production in the second half of the twentieth century. Memmi’s works, then, produce theories that resonate both within and beyond their original context.

To put forth Memmi’s “production of theory” as a crucial element in the title of this study is to unsettle our received notions of what theory is and where it may be found. Given that we are accustomed to thinking about theory as a genre unto itself that works on, or from, textual, cultural, and aesthetic objects in order to produce a set of speculatory insights, it might seem unorthodox to propose that theory can be produced in the absence of an author’s intention to do so, or that it might be found in those very objects we have become accustomed to theorizing. Whereas one quite naturally recognizes a theoretical operation at work in Memmi’s essays on colonized subjects, Jews, and relations of dominance and dependency, it is perhaps less readily obvious to conceive of his other texts (novels, interviews, prefaces) as sites where theory is fashioned. One of the main goals of Against Autobiography, then, is to expose this theoretical operation as it is produced in novel sites. Finally, to suggest that one might locate theoretical discourses in a constellation of texts that includes essays, novels, and
interviews is to both reconceptualize theory itself and reimagine its proper location.

The seductions and temptations of autobiographical reading are certainly understandable, particularly given that Memmi’s origins and life story are tightly woven into the historical fabric of the twentieth century. Certainly Memmi’s trajectory has been deeply inflected by the events of the recent past: born a poor Jew in a colonized Arab land, a subject of French imperialism educated in the colonial school system, his identity was forged in the thorny interstices of a cultural and geopolitical situation that would only grow more complicated with decolonization and the rise of pan-Arabism in the Maghreb. As a member of an indigenous group in French-ruled Tunisia, Memmi was considered a colonial subject; as a Jew, however, opportunities for French education and the possibility of an easier path to French citizenship set him apart from his Muslim compatriots. Between colonized and colonizer, Jew and Arab, occident and orient, Memmi’s position has always been historically ambiguous. The dominant narrative of his life, then, has been one of a subject whose multiple belongings challenge the notion of fixed identities and easy binaries.

The author’s work undoubtedly bears the traces of this history and of a personal struggle to come to terms with his hybrid identity. Educated entirely in French, first at schools run by the Alliance israélite universelle (a colonial school system founded and managed by French Jewish interests), then at the prestigious lycée Carnot in Tunis and the University of Algiers, and finally in sociology and philosophy departments of Parisian universities, Memmi is Tunisia’s most decorated francophone author and its first writer and contemporary thinker of international renown. When he was born—quite literally “at the end of a cul-de-sac” at the edge of La Hara (the Jewish ghetto of Tunis) on December 15, 1920—Tunisia had been a French protectorate since 1881. Unlike the Grana—bourgeois Jews descended from Livornese immi-
grants, whose children were educated at the French-run lycée and who benefited from greater socioeconomic mobility, the Memmi family were Touensa—“ghetto” or indigenous Jews whose socioeconomic status did not favor intellectual pursuits. Albert’s father, Fradj Memmi, was a saddle maker; his mother, Maïra Sarfati, was illiterate and spoke only a Judeo-Arabic dialect. As the eldest of twelve children, Memmi would typically have been destined to apprentice at his father’s workshop and follow in his footsteps. His early success at the kouttab, however, caught the attention of members of the Jewish community, and he was awarded a scholarship that allowed him to attend the Alliance grade school and, later, the lycée Carnot (1932–39). It was at Carnot that Memmi, greatly influenced by his teachers Jean Amrouche and Aimé Patri, decided to dedicate his life to the study of philosophy and literature.

The extension of the Second World War into North Africa and the subsequent promulgation of the Vichy laws in the region made it impossible for Memmi to complete his studies at the University of Algiers. In 1942, he and the other Jews were expelled from the university; the next two years were spent in work camps in Tunisia. At the end of the war, Memmi made his first trip to Paris, where he completed studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne and married Germaine Dubach, a young Catholic woman from Alsace, before returning to Tunis in 1951. During what would be Memmi’s final years in Tunisia, he worked as a professor at Carnot, founded a psycho-pedagogical center, and directed the literary and cultural section of L’Action, the first French-language newspaper with Tunisian nationalist sympathies. It was also during this politically and intellectually charged period that Memmi would emerge as Tunisia’s first francophone novelist, publishing The Pillar of Salt in 1953 and Agar in 1954. These final years in Tunis also marked the beginning of Memmi’s work as an essayist. In conversation with colleagues from Carnot, he began to make notes for the manuscript that would become his seminal study of the colonized condition, The Colonizer and the Colonized.
The decision to return to Paris in 1956, the same year that colonial rule ended in the French protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, was a vital one for Memmi, for the atmosphere on the eve of independence had become, as he describes it, “stifling.” Like many Tunisian Jews of the same era, he had strong albeit conflicted cultural and intellectual ties to France, and although he was an active proponent of Tunisian independence, Memmi sensed that the nationalism and pan-Arabism of the newly independent Bourguiba government would leave little space in civic life for the hybrid Arab-Jews.8 Describing the role of the geopolitical conjuncture in his decision to go into exile, Memmi wrote, “I don’t think I would have left Tunis if History hadn’t chased me out, if it hadn’t become impossible to live in my native city.”9 By 1956 the author and his family had settled permanently in Paris, and in 1973 he became a naturalized French citizen.10

Upon his arrival in Paris, Memmi obtained a position at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (cnrs), and in parallel with his research activity he taught at the École pratique des hautes études and at the University of Paris-X (Nanterre), where he held a chair in cultural sociology. For a time he participated in the activities of the Temps modernes group and at one point agreed to direct a special issue on Tunisia.11 According to Memmi, it was his association with the group, which revolved around Jean-Paul Sartre, that led him to be viewed as an écrivain engagé or a committed writer. Memmi, however, claims to have been put off by the idol worship Sartre inspired among his acolytes, and he attended only a few meetings of the Temps modernes editorial board.12 The special issue on Tunisia never came to fruition.

Although Memmi’s early forays into fiction were successful, earning him awards and positive reviews—The Pillar of Salt, prefaced by Albert Camus, garnered the Prix Fénéon—after Agar he would not publish another novel until the late 1960s. Firmly ensconced in Paris’s Marais district, where he still lives today, he embarked upon a more experimental mode of fiction with The
Scorpion; or, *The Imaginary Confession* (1969) and *Le désert; ou, Les aventures de Jubaïr Ouali el-Mammi* (The desert; or, The adventures of Jubair el-Mammi, 1977). Neither of these works has enjoyed the same attention and readership as his earlier novels, and Memmi himself has said that, particularly in the case of *The Scorpion*, his readers did not understand what he was trying to accomplish. He has nonetheless continued to write fiction, publishing *Le Pharaon* (The pharaoh) in 1988 and a set of interconnected short stories titled *Teresa et autres femmes* (Teresa and other women) in 2004. *Le mirliton du ciel* (The reed pipe of the sky, 1985) is the author’s only collection of poetry to date.

Memmi has undoubtedly won broader attention for his essays. *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) is now considered a classic and was once a *livre de combat* for “colonized” peoples from the Congo to Québec. Other essays depart from the colonial context but nonetheless articulate themselves around dialectal pairs (Jew and Arab; purveyor and dependent; dominator and dominated). Memmi quite literally wrote the definitions of “racism” and “heterophobia”—the latter a term he coined to capture the pervasive fear of difference that undergirds racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice. Most recently, Memmi published *Testament insolent* (Insolent legacy, 2009), a book-length essay in which he revisits a number of themes and issues from secularism and happiness to duos and dependency.

In the domain of literature Memmi’s legacy has been slow to establish itself, and while his impact on the fields of sociology and postcolonial studies cannot be denied, all too often his contributions (like those of Moroccan writers Albedelkébir Khatibi or Abdellatif Laâbi) have lingered in the wings while those of Frantz Fanon occupy center stage. Like Memmi, Fanon fascinates both for his personal story and his groundbreaking work on colonization; in the case of Fanon, however, an interest in the former has not come to overshadow, or overdetermine, critical appreciations of the latter.
In a move that seeks to redress such imbalances and reframe Albert Memmi’s contributions to literary, theoretical, and postcolonial studies, Against Autobiography places the Tunisian author’s work at the center of intellectual debates that animated the second half of the twentieth century and continue to resonate within scholarly circles. The book’s structure is designed to explore the points of contact between Memmi’s literary production and four major developments in Western critical discourse: the crisis of the authorial subject; the interrogation of the form of the novel; the resistance to the hegemony of vision and the ocular; and the critique of colonialism (itself part of the broader process of decolonization). Each of these moments is typical of the epistemic shift of the postwar period, which corresponded to a profound interrogation of hegemonic, totalizing structures. The dawning of the era of the “posts”—postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism—and the establishment and subsequent reexamination of francophonie as a literary category are also reflected in these developments.

In French thought, the crisis of the subject emerged when the linguistic turn challenged the primacy of consciousness as a foundation for knowledge and meaning, positing language as constitutive of reality and thus setting aside anthropocentric models of knowledge. The move in favor of evacuating the subject was perhaps best encapsulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s declaration that “the goal of human sciences is not to constitute man but to dissolve him.” From the dissolution of man and the revolt against the “return of the Cartesian cogito in Husserlian phenomenology,” it was but a small step to the dissolution of the author as the maker of meaning in writing. Just as the subject gave way to language, the author gave way—in theory—to the text, thus becoming irrelevant to structuralism and poststructuralism.

The second of the four critical discourses mentioned above is implied directly in the “death of the author.” For if “the novel is the expression of a changing society,” it follows that the epistemic
revolution which brought about the “disappearance” of the subject would have reverberations within that particular genre. In the same year that Memmi completed *The Pillar of Salt*, Les Editions de Minuit published what would later be described as the first *nouveau roman*: Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers*. Less the name of a coherent movement than a broad rubric describing a group of writers working in a similarly experimental vein, the nouveau roman might nonetheless be characterized by several dominant principles: the rejection of nineteenth-century Balzacian realism; highlighted relativity and uncertainty; and, in keeping with critical trends in sociology and philosophy, the removal of man and his context from a position of primacy. Stylistic exploration was also a hallmark of the new novel, and by rejecting traditional novelistic elements—plot, character, linear narrative time—the new novelists laid bare the inner mechanisms of the genre. This new approach to the novel consequently gave way to new forms of autobiography, particularly as *nouveaux romanciers* like Natalie Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet began to produce self-conscious first-person narratives that would come to be labeled *nouvelle autobiographie*. Thus as the rules governing the novel were interrogated and dismantled, and as representations of the self in writing ceased to obey traditional schemas, critical awareness of the ambiguity and instability of genre boundaries became heightened.

Because of its perceived obsession with the visual, the nouveau roman was sometimes called *l’école du regard* [the school of the gaze], a fact that provides an opportune segue to the third critical shift within the epistemological moment under consideration: the rise of “antiocularcentrism.” Once considered to be ocularcentric in the Hellenic tradition, Western culture and French thought in particular began, in the early twentieth century, to turn away from the “noblest of the senses.” Martin Jay suggests that a “denigration” of vision began to emerge with the work of Henri Bergson, becoming increasingly complex and at times contradictory in the postwar era. The rejection of the eye and the visual as reposito-
eries of power participates in a current of thought that sought to counter the totalizing aspects of the Enlightenment project. While vision in the eighteenth century was thought to play a central role in perception, knowledge, and the theorization of the acquisition of knowledge, the postmodern critique of modernity has taken to task the hegemony of vision and the eye as a source of “power-knowledge” in the Foucauldian sense of the term.

Linked to concerns regarding hegemonic and totalizing systems of power, the rejection of the imperial project is the final moment in which this study situates Memmi’s work. The 1950s in France saw the emergence of an anticolonial movement and the production of a contemporaneous anticolonial discourse among intellectuals on both sides of the imperial equation. In the aftermath of the Second World War, European intellectuals such as Sartre and the *Temps modernes* group rallied to take up a position against the continued presence of France in Indochina and the Maghreb. Fueled in particular by the crisis in Algeria (1954–62), European intellectuals demanded the independence of France’s colonies. In parallel, colonized and recently decolonized intellectuals took up their pens to denounce colonialism—writing both for their compatriots and for a European audience. At times mentored and encouraged by their European counterparts, these thinkers were compelling voices in the struggle for independence. The discourses that emerged sought to demonstrate the negative impact of the colonial project on the colonized peoples subjugated by the system; they also aimed to reveal to Europeans that their participation in the colonial project was equally malevolent to their own society.

Given the weight of these four critical discourses, it is important not to lose sight of the specificity of Memmi’s work, for to focus on a writer typically qualified as “Francophone” is also to engage with a specific set of categorizations and problems: Is a Francophone writer necessarily a postcolonial writer? What role is played by the writer’s original culture? Is Francophone literature fundamentally different from its metropolitan counterpart? How does the exis-
tence of a category like francophonie—given its cultural, institutional, and linguistic iterations—influence the way these works are read? While each chapter of *Against Autobiography* interrogates the points of contact between a given critical discourse and the theories produced by a cross-section of Memmi’s texts, the aforementioned questions are also used to structure the study, grounding it in the historical and institutional debates that surround francophone writing while interrogating the debates themselves.

The first chapter, “Of Authors and Archives: Albert Memmi’s Francophone Postcolonial,” establishes and complicates a history of francophonie and the postcolonial as concepts relating to the crisis of the subject, particularly the writing subject. Through an analysis of his position on francophonie in prefaces to three anthologies of Maghrebi literature in French, Memmi emerges as an arbiter of literary categories. Furthermore, the exploration of his prefaces reveals the story of a definition in evolution, suggesting that Memmi’s francophonie was in fact a proto-form of the postcolonial. It is my contention that Memmi’s oeuvre is complicated by a paradox that emerges at the intersection of twentieth-century author theory and postcolonial studies: while Barthes’s “burial” of the author liberated the text from the intention and biography of its creator, postcolonial studies is motivated by a deep consideration of the author’s subject position and identity (race, origin, gender). An analysis of the nuances of this paradox demonstrates how francophone postcolonial literatures generally and Memmi specifically have remained outside of the paradigm shifts that have impacted the Western literary canon. In a final gesture, this chapter looks to feminist theory’s multiple interrogations of “author theory” as an alternative paradigm for francophone postcolonial studies.

The second chapter, “Writing Back to Whom? Novel Strategies of Ambiguity and the ‘Mark of the Plural,’” examines the generic ambiguity of Memmi’s novels and personal essays in order to complicate the question of “writing back.” A catchphrase of postcolonial studies, “writing back” suggests that the ensemble of colonized
or recently decolonized individuals—perceived as peripheral to a former colonial center—uses its literary production as a means of resisting the center’s discursive hegemony. Although the concept of “writing back” presents certain useful hermeneutical aspects, it is rooted in the assumption that the former empire has but a single interlocutor: its former imperial authority. Memmi’s work would appear to suggest a more complex response, and in the second chapter, through close readings of his novels, interviews, and “official” autobiography, I explore the ambiguous nature of the genres of autobiography and novel in works by Memmi and two other Maghrebi writers, Driss Chraïbi and Mouloud Feraoun. Memmi’s first-person narratives are revealed to be doubly subversive: by employing the first-person pronoun, they contravene Jewish and Muslim literary traditions, historically distrustful of the “I,” while thwarting the “mark of the plural”—the tendency to treat the non-Western individual as representative of the non-Western collectivity. Furthermore, the generic ambiguity that characterizes Memmi’s work suggests that the Maghrebi novelist, like many French novelists of the same era, was engaged in an interrogation of literary forms and their limits, an interpretation that complicates the notion that writers from the periphery operate in a primarily mimetic mode.

The third chapter, “Writing without Seeing: The Enigmas of Memmi’s ‘Denigration of Vision,’” explores the position of Memmi’s corpus with respect to the visual and the various discourses its theorization has produced. Antiocularcentrism dominated the second part of twentieth-century French thought, with major figures such as Foucault, Derrida, and Levinas critiquing the centrality of the eye and the hegemony of vision. Close examination of their theories, however, reveals a contradiction: despite the call to resist the power of the gaze, there is recognition of the all-pervasive nature of the visual. Because blindness and vision constitute recurrent tropes in Memmi’s novels and essays, the representation of blindness appears to function as a critique of interpretation; as
various characters lose their vision or are confronted with symbolic blindness, their capacity to read—that is, to interpret—increases. This would appear to place Memmi’s oeuvre firmly within the antiocularcentric domain of his contemporaries. At the same time, however, tropes of vision and an interest in the representative capacity of the visual complicate the initial reading. After examining an episode of symbolic blindness in *The Pillar of Salt* (1953), I turn to a later, more experimental novel, *The Scorpion; or, The Imaginary Confession* (1969), in which physical sight is also thrown into question. Notwithstanding this apparent rejection of the visual, the textual presentation of *The Scorpion*, with its five fonts and intercalated images, gestures to the importance of the visual in representation. Furthermore, Memmi theorizes his own use of visual coding in the essay *L’écriture colorée; ou, Je vous aime en rouge* (Writing in color; or, I love you in red, 1986), in which he proposes a system of colors designed to represent different levels of discourse and verisimilitude. As a companion piece to *The Scorpion*, *L’écriture colorée* provides the occasion to examine the limits of this contradiction whereby an apparent desire for clarity obfuscates its own goal. Rather than inscribe Memmi’s work definitively within an ocularphilic or ocularphobic mode, this chapter reveals the complex interrelationship of the two.

The final chapter, “From Colonizer and Colonized to Decolonization and the Decolonized: Texts, Contexts, Paratexts,” historicizes and analyzes Memmi’s most celebrated essay by placing it alongside other significant “calls to arms” of the colonial struggle (manifestos by Fanon, Césaire, and Amrouche). I begin by tracing the emergence of an anticolonial discourse that took root in the 1950s and was situated largely in Paris, bringing together engaged intellectuals from both France and the colonized world. Although similar in its goal to the other anticolonial essays of the era, Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* differed in its desire to represent both protagonists in the colonial drama. Notwithstanding its qualifications as distanced and objective, Memmi’s essay presents
an authorial voice that is anything but detached from its subject. Rather than a rallying cry of “us” against “them,” the voice of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* oscillates between “same” and “other” yet assimilates neither. The authorial voice is ambiguous and profoundly dialogic, meanwhile employing such strategies as irony and litotes, which destabilize the reader. Existing readings of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* have failed to analyze these elements, which suggests that the essay’s nature as a literary artifact has yet to be fully accounted for. Finally, the chapter examines the role of the paratext—particularly Sartre’s preface to Memmi’s essay—in shaping the reception of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, and it closes with a consideration of the 2004 “sequel” essay, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*.

Rather than conclude, *Against Autobiography* offers an opportunity for continued reflection by speculating on the potential of Memmi’s work and thought to provide new frameworks for rethinking very recent debates. “Albert Memmi in the Post-Francophone World” reads several of the author’s literary prefaces as offering prescient solutions to certain problems of classification posed by contemporary polemics. The 2007 manifesto “Toward a ‘World-Literature’ in French” and the ongoing conversations it has produced have prompted scholars of francophone literature to revisit, once again, the terms and categories they use to define and delimit their objects of study. Although Memmi was not involved in the formulation of the concept (nor was he invited to sign the manifesto), his earlier meditations on francophonie, when read alongside the text of “Toward a World-Literature in French,” reveal the derivative nature of the manifesto. Memmi’s reflections in turn constitute an implicit blueprint for inclusive categories whose architecture reflects an understanding that terminological pragmatics need not pose a threat to emerging poetics.

The interpretative paths suggested by *Against Autobiography* open the way for critical practices that allow works of Maghrebi francophone literature to be read as complex literary objects
that do not simply offer themselves up as ethnographic curios but instead interact with and produce theories of literature. Indeed, when we cease to “beat the text into a shape that serves [our] purpose,” we discover that Memmi’s body of work generates theoretical and heuristic possibilities that reach beyond the confines of his corpus to interact with major epistemological moments of twentieth-century thought and that, by extension, similarly rich prospects might be imagined for the texts of other writers from the putative margins.23
AGAINST AUTOBIOGRAPHY
1 Of Authors and Archives

Albert Memmi’s Francophone Postcolonial

All French literature is Francophone.
Tom Conley, “From Detail to Periphery” (2003)

My problem with sorting orders is that they do not last; I have scarcely finished filing things before the filing system is obsolete.
Georges Perec, Thoughts of Sorts, trans. David Bellos (2009)

Together with the rise of high theory in the 1960s and the feminist “revolutions” of the 1970s, the emergence and recognition of francophone literatures has been hailed as one of the most important changes witnessed by the field of French studies in the past half-century.1 The “Francophone turn” brought with it myriad questions of categorization and nomenclature, as scholars endeavored to situate these new objects of study, both institutionally and philosophically. Although Albert Memmi has avoided directly engaging the fever of taxonomy that has produced and, in turn, unsettled rubrics such as “francophone,” “postcolonial,” “littérature-monde en français,” and “world Frenches,” a number of his writings nonetheless stake out significant theoretical territory with respect to categories of literary production and definitions of authorial types. A useful place to begin the critical reappraisal of Memmi’s work, then, is precisely with his oft-overlooked role as an arbiter of cultural politics in the field of francophone literary studies. Specifically, from the outset of his career Memmi has
articulated positions that complicate prevailing critical discourses on the identity of the postcolonial francophone author; on the emergence and evolution of francophone literature; on the parameters of postcolonial studies in the French-speaking world; and on the nature of authorial subjectivity and the status of “the Author” with respect to francophonie.

Memmi’s initial attempt to theorize the francophone author took the form of a brief subsection embedded in his first major contribution to what would become postcolonial theory, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957). The passage in question posits the condition of the colonized writer as emblematic of the colonized subject in general: “[His] linguistic ambiguity is the symbol and one of the major causes of his cultural ambiguity. The position of a colonized writer is a perfect illustration of this. . . . The fact is that the role of colonized writer is too difficult to sustain. He incarnates a magnified vision of all the ambiguity and impossibilities of the colonized.” At the same time, the text further universalizes its case by underscoring the linguistic drama common to all colonized writers compelled to use the language of their conquerors: “The emergence of a literature of a colonized people, the development of a consciousness by North African writers, for example, is not an isolated occurrence. It is part of the development of the self-consciousness of an entire human group.”

Using the North African writer as his model—one again moving from the local to the global—Memmi would thus extrapolate a general theory of colonized writers working in European, or colonial, languages, in a move that ultimately sounded the death knell for colonized literature. Viewed retrospectively through the filter of contemporary postcolonial theory, it was a gesture that today appears fatalistic: “The problem can be concluded in only two ways: by the natural death of colonized literature; the following generations, born in liberty, will write spontaneously in their newly found language. Without waiting that long, a second possibility can tempt the writer: to decide to join the literature of the

2  Of Authors and Archives
mother country. Let us leave aside the ethical problems raised by such an attitude. It is the suicide of colonized literature; in either prospect (the only difference being in the date) colonized literature in European language appears condemned to die young.”3 In a text that tends to scrupulously deny the reader both predictions and prescriptions—an aspect of The Colonizer and the Colonized often reproved by critics—such an augury is remarkable, if nothing short of bleak. While the double-bind of the colonized writer resolved itself in a manner that would prove Memmi wrong—the continued production of colonized (and later, postcolonial) literature left Memmi with no choice but to recant this earlier position and refine his intransigence—the impasse he describes is a potent reminder of a time before postcolonial theory. As such, Memmi’s prediction historicizes the advent of hermeneutical tools proposed by critics such as Ashcroft, Bhabha, and Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom suggest—through a kind of dialogue across time with Memmi—alternatives to a discourse of foreclosure.4

Notwithstanding his convictions at the end of the 1950s, Memmi would go on to champion not only literature in French by colonized and postcolonial writers alike but also literary works produced by French writers of the metropole whose path through the Maghreb was determined by the colonial project. Several decades would pass before discourses of “writing back” and “becoming minor” would attain common currency among scholars and critics; yet, already in 1964, Memmi would edit and preface the first in a series of anthologies to valorize the works of both indigenous writers from the Maghreb and French writers whose lives and works were inspired by their encounters with North Africa.5 Indeed, a sustained analysis of Memmi’s prefices to these anthologies reveals an evolution over time in his position regarding the colonized writer and literary works produced in colonial languages. Beyond this, however, the prefices also suggest an implicit dialogue with contemporaneous literary theories and criticism as well as a pre-
scient vision of the changes in definitions, categories, and names that lay on the horizon.

**Anthologizing Authors: Constituting a Corpus**

Memmi’s role as editor and prefacer of three anthologies of Maghrebi literature in French afforded him a unique position as arbiter of literary categories. The three tomes’ titles alone—*Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d’expression française* (Anthology of Maghrebi writers of French expression, 1964), *Anthologie des écrivains français du Maghreb* (Anthology of French writers from the Maghreb, 1969), and *Ecrivains francophones du Maghreb: Une anthologie* (Francophone writers of the Maghreb: An anthology, 1985)—suggest not only an effort at categorization but also a slippage in the categories as they are created: how is one to understand the differentiation between a Maghrebi writer of French expression, a French writer from the Maghreb, and a francophone writer from the Maghreb, particularly in the colonial/postcolonial context where citizenship and national identity are not necessarily synonymous? Memmi’s prefaces to the three anthologies lay bare the difficulty not only of establishing criteria for inclusion but also of adequately defining those criteria. Hence, while a concept of the francophone author does begin to emerge as one reads chronologically across the three prefaces, Memmi’s notion of “francophone” differs from the commonly accepted usages of the term in contemporary literary (and linguistic) designations. Even in the third and final anthology of 1985, in which Memmi’s preface would establish a set of criteria for the category of francophonie that moves away from the primacy of authorial difference, his implicit definition of “francophone” would continue to place considerable emphasis on the content and representational stakes of the anthologized works.

Of the three, only the 1985 anthology includes the term *francophone* in its title. Conversely, the titles of the first two anthologies perform acrobatic circumlocutions in order to classify the authors featured in each volume. The 1964 collection thus presents writ-
nings by “Maghrebi writers of French expression”—authors who are from North Africa and whose language of (literary) expression is French. Being from North Africa, however, is not a discrete category. As Memmi points out in the *Avertissement*, “We restricted our selection to works written by autochthonous writers.” In this instance, “autochthonous writer” refers to indigenous authors of Arab-Muslim, Berber, Jewish, or Christian extraction. It is a curious detail: what other kind of Maghrebi author might there be? The second anthology responds to that question with a surprising maneuver that reverses the conceit of the first by featuring an entirely different set of authors. Specifically, the 1969 *Anthologie des écrivains français du Maghreb* presents writers who are not “of the Maghreb” in an ethnic or national sense but rather are European colonists (French subjects) residing in Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia.

“The second tome, which we present here today,” Memmi writes in the preface, “groups together, in another synthetic portrait, the former colonies’ European inhabitants or inhabitants of European extraction.”

Yet Memmi also acknowledges the repercussions of devoting this second anthology exclusively to European writers, and subsequently his 1969 preface anticipates the critique of a division that upholds the dualistic logic of colonialism: “Would we not end up, paradoxically, hewing to the same colonial categories that I had once criticized, and that effectively claimed to fix for eternity the distinguishing characteristics of the two groups?” In answer to his own question, he insists instead on a rationale that might be described as “separate but equal.” According to Memmi, no desire to erase the divisions of the colonial past can ever evacuate the reality of their existence; his two-tome solution to the presentation of literature from the Maghreb written in French is reminiscent, in that regard, of the dialectical rhetoric staged in his seminal essay on colonization, in which the portrait of the colonized stands alongside, and is linked to, that of the colonizer. If the situation of colonization (“le fait colonial”) creates both the colonized and
the colonizer, it follows that the same situation produces literature from both parties. An attempt to account for literature from the region must then recognize the cultural productions of both sides of the colonial equation, even if their situations were inherently unequal: “It is enough to read their texts together in this manner to grasp the extent to which all writers from North Africa, Colonizers and Colonized, lived, each in his own way, the colonial relationship. A story of frustration, lack, and denial for one group; of glory and privilege for the other, for which they felt at once proud and guilty. Yet both felt deeply, and expressed more or less directly, the colonial situation.”

For Memmi, in other words, the tale of the colonial situation required the voice of the colonized, yet it could not be complete without the voice of the colonizer. That the two were anthologized separately speaks to their different lived experiences and the distinct way in which they each expressed “le fait colonial”; that they are treated in consecutive tomes, linked by virtue of their prefaces, speaks to the invisible sutures that bound the two literary communities—geographically, linguistically, and temporally, if not always politically and culturally.

Inherent in the first anthology (1964) is the notion that the “painter” of this particular North African reality must be, first and foremost, an autochthonous writer. Indeed, the group that would later be featured in the 1969 anthology—the French writers of the Maghreb—is specifically mentioned in the 1964 preface as representing a reality different from that of the autochthonous population: “This generation (Camus, Audisio, French settlers) was not destined to found a North African literature. There are many reasons for this. Whereas Roblès, Jules Roy, or Rosfelder are North African by birth or by temperament, they also have a Parisian vocation. Very early on their natural, and legitimate, ambition was to be French writers like any other—indeed, among the best.”

In this way, the preface to the first anthology paved the way for the second by laying out what would become the categories for the
1969 volume, dedicated precisely to those writers who were not destined to be the founders of a North African literature. (They were to be, as described above, the voices of a lived experience of the colonial situation, complementary to those of the colonized.) Hence, just as the anthology of 1964 focused the reader’s attention on a depiction of Maghrebi reality performed by indigenous North Africans, so would the collection of 1969 restrict its purview to representations of the colonial reality as lived (and written) by authentic French from the Maghreb: “French writers from North Africa could hardly speak about their Muslim or Jewish fellow-citizens: they had barely any contact with them. . . . Their task was to depict their own people, their childhoods and their adult adventures, in a country, a landscape, and a population in which they found themselves by accident and in which they did not fully recognize themselves.”

As with the project of 1964, it is also clear here that what legitimates the selection of the texts for the 1969 anthology is the representation of reality by subjects that have experienced that reality directly. Yet Memmi would also seek to “purify” the category “French writer from the Maghreb” by eliminating those whom he refers to as “Ecrivains-touristes” [Tourist-Writers]—Gide, Fromentin, Flaubert—whose brief travels in Africa and subsequent descriptions of the land, its people, and their culture lacked the credibility of true lived experience. For them, Memmi declares, “the Maghreb was no more than a pretext, an African accessory.”

If, in the 1960s, separate portraits were needed to paint an accurate historical fresco of North African literature from the colonial period and its immediate aftermath, by 1985 lexical winds had blown a new term in Memmi’s direction. The collection titled Ecrivains francophones du Maghreb was a transnational endeavor designed to bring together the colonizer and the colonized. This gesture ended the apartheid that had governed the “separate but equal” status of the 1964 and 1969 collections. Memmi’s use of the term “francophone” in 1985 is rendered viable by historical
conjuncture and the attenuation of tensions that accompanied the immediate aftermath of colonial independence: “The turmoil of History having more or less subsided, shouldn’t we reevaluate our classifications as well in light of these changes?”

In the 1985 anthology, Assia Djebar finds her place alongside Isabelle Eberhardt, Camus alongside Chraïbi, Roblès alongside Kateb. Such a treatment would have been unthinkable in an earlier historical context, in which the colonizer-colonized binary dominated both the cultural imaginary and the discourse of decolonization, and the term “francophone” was viewed with suspicion: “I must state here how much the notion of francophonie, which we once experienced as spontaneously as Monsieur Jourdain wrote prose, has been helpful to us. It hasn’t always been popular. Certain people saw it as a last ruse of colonialism, a way of maintaining, through culture, a weakened political stranglehold. . . . But it is true that an important event has occurred: French, having ceased to be the language of a colonial nation, should no longer raise any particular suspicion. Today, francophonie simply means that the French language miraculously unites a group of writers from the world over” (my italics).

Here Memmi explicitly addresses the subtext of “la francophonie” as a neocolonial stratagem or as yet another stanza of colonization’s swan song. By laying bare the preconceptions about francophonie’s past, Memmi seeks to debunk them. Yet there is a note of wishful thinking in the text, lurking in the verb tenses of the penultimate phrase: French, having ceased to be the language of a colonial nation, should no longer raise suspicion. The conditional tense of “should” implies that what Memmi himself once surmised might have happened in the wake of decolonization—the disappearance of French as the lingua franca of literary expression in the Maghreb—has not yet occurred. He thus allows doubt about the nature of francophonie to seep in between the lines of his third preface, suggesting that its advent may not be as patent as he would have his reader believe. In fact, the appearance of the terms francophone and francophonie in the preface to his 1985 anthology has
important and largely unacknowledged ramifications for the place of Memmi in the development of postcolonial (literary and theoretical) discourse. Consequently, it is worth situating Memmi’s interventions (in 1985 and beyond) more precisely in relation both to the origins of the terms in France and to the critical formations in which they have evolved. To do so is to illuminate his connection to ongoing debates about the constitution of postcolonial francophone literature, the meaning and condition of francophonie, and the theoretical edifice of academic francophone studies.

**Mapping Francophone Geographies (Origins of a Term)**

Although it appears to recognize and readily dispatch colonial legacies, the 1985 preface is significantly more circumspect with regard to the implications of its terminological choices for the literary field. What Memmi presents as evident—that the French language unites a group of writers, some from former colonies, some from the metropole—constitutes a new conceptual framework for the categories of francophone and francophonie. Whereas Memmi’s use of the term articulates a space capable of accommodating both indigenous Maghrebi and French subjects, “francophone” and “francophonie” have nonetheless known various and contradictory permutations since their first use in the nineteenth century, at times seeking the largest possible gesture of inclusion and at others denoting alterity. If Memmi avoids calling attention to the problematics associated with the term, it is nonetheless clear that his usage of “francophone” in the 1985 preface is closely linked to its denotative meaning, whereby the lexeme refers to a speaker of the French language (irrespective of nationality) or serves as an adjective describing cultural productions elaborated in French, irrespective of the geographical locus of its creation or the national origins of its creator. The various connotative significations of “francophone,” however, suggest a slippage in meaning that is, at times, antithetical to its denotative usage and at odds with the sense implied in Memmi’s 1985 preface.
Coined by French geographer Onésime Reclus in 1880, a time that might well be described as the apex of French imperialism, “francophone” was originally an exclusionary term used to designate both speakers of French who were not French nationals and French citizens whose native tongue was not French: “We accept as francophone all those who are or seem to be destined to remain or become participants in our language: Bretons and Basques from France, Arabs and Berbers from the Tell who are already our subjects. However, we do not include all Belgians in la francophonie even though it seems likely that it is the Flamingants’ [Flemish speakers] destiny to become Franquillons [French speakers, or Wallons].” Far from being a simple linguistic marker, “francophone” as defined by Reclus carried with it a distinctly colonial currency. As such, its elaboration reveals underlying anxieties with regard to national purity and the deeply embedded imperial underpinnings of the initial francophone project.

It is crucial, however, to underscore that the label “francophone” was not, as it is often parsed by critics, strictly limited to colonized peoples. Included within Reclus’s definition of francophone are those who are “destined to remain or become participants in our language”—which includes both “Bretons and Basques from France.” Extant polyglossia within the hexagon is noteworthy: “Even in France, while the national language is understood everywhere, there are regions where it is not at all the usual idiom.” Francophone and francophonie thus stand as categories distinct not from France and Frenchmen but from a certain kind of Frenchness—that of the metropolitan whose native tongue is French. For Reclus, then, francophonie is peripheral to an original center whose boundaries do not necessarily coincide with those of the nation. His definition thus contrasts sharply with the inclusive grammatical category of francophone peoples (which nominally denotes all speakers of French) by inscribing a perimeter around “authentic” native speakers within the national territory.

If Memmi’s understanding of francophone and francophonie
differs from Reclus’s insofar as it emphasizes similarity over difference, it also stands in contrast to contemporary uses in both institutional and academic settings. The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)—a transnational group that “embodies the active solidarity between its seventy-five member states”—takes a much broader view of what it means to be francophone and to participate in this particular institutional configuration of francophonie. Indeed, in addition to France and most of its former colonies (countries where French is either an official or historical language), member states include nations where the French language has no unofficial status (such as Albania, Bulgaria, or Greece). Furthermore, this vision of an ensemble that encompasses national entities where French is a minority language, or where French is taught as a second or third language, complicates both Memmi’s and Reclus’s definitions of the terms, for it effectively splits apart francophonie and francophone: as defined by the OIF, it is possible to participate in francophonie without being francophone at all.

The deployment of the categories “francophone” and “francophonie” within the academy, however, carries with it an entirely different set of debates. Indeed, it is in this context that questions of definition and usage become freighted with disciplinary and theoretical concerns. In France, the United States, and the United Kingdom, universities have carved out institutional space for francophonie as a category of literary, cultural, and historical scholarship; its objects of study are defined, however, by criteria reminiscent of Reclus’s vision of the concept. Scholars who study francophone literature (or work in the field of francophone studies) thus focus on the former French colonies and its current overseas territories (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Reunion Island) typically to the exclusion of both the metropole and European regions where French is spoken (Belgium, Switzerland). Unlike Memmi’s vision of a transnational francophonie, this categorization of francophone literature erects boundaries between France
and francophonie. And despite the fact that scholars and academic departments periodically problematize their own use of a literary category that may reify difference, for the moment certain pragmatic considerations seem to keep francophone firmly anchored in place.

If Memmi’s 1985 preface clearly demonstrates a desire to evacuate the subtext of difference from francophone as a literary category, his logic was punctuated by an awareness that the experiential divide between European writers working in French and colonized or formerly colonized writers publishing in the language would nonetheless need to be recognized: “the French consider Henri Michaux a French writer, even though he is Belgian, just as they always counted Rousseau among the greatest 18th-century writers, in spite of the fact that he constantly affirmed his connection to Geneva. . . . Could Maghrebi writers be treated the same way, even in the face of their common solidarity, the shared subject of their works, the authentically African aspect of their imagination—despite the fact that it is expressed in French?”31 As optimistic as the 1985 preface may be with respect to the advent of francophonie, it nonetheless foregrounds the fact that writers with multiple identities pose a problem for categorization:

One day, perhaps, when we are all a little less sensitive, less jealous, or less anxious, these considerations will feel less weighty. If we could imagine that man can belong to two or even three communities without being considered a traitor or a monster, these problems would no longer have this whiff of scandal. Why couldn’t a French-language Maghrebi writer also be classified as a French writer, since he indeed participates—albeit in different ways—in both traditions? Even as I write these lines, I can sense the heated questions that they provoke; however, accepting this reality which, in a few years, will seem commonplace would help us, as writers of two cultures, to live.32
Indeed, it is because existing rubrics prohibit one from being both a Maghrebi writer and a French writer—such a hybrid being, were he to exist, could only arouse suspicion—that Memmi has recourse to francophonie as a taxonomical and theoretical framework capable of accounting for both difference and similitude. In bringing together under a single rubric literary objects produced by writers from both the metropole and the formerly colonized Maghreb, the final preface in Memmi’s series not only intervenes in semantic questions (who and what is francophone?), it also—however tacitly—participates across time in ongoing discussions pertaining to disciplinary divisions and theoretical fields.

Francophone Postcolonial avant la lettre

Memmi’s theorization of francophonie as a unifying, transnational rubric, capable at once of creating a utopia of writerly camaraderie and of transcending the colonizer-colonized binary, was nonetheless destined to be disregarded by the literary and academic establishment. However, while the discipline of francophone studies continues to define its archive of literary objects as exclusively extra-metropolitan, innovations in literary theory and criticism suggest that Memmi’s framework for “francophone writers” was nothing less than prescient. That Memmi’s 1985 anthology and its preface recognize a place for metropolitan writers in the category of francophone literature speaks to an undertheorized aspect of postcolonial studies and, as such, foreshadows certain turns in postcolonial thought. Furthermore, Memmi’s goal of erasing binaries in order to replace them with constellations of texts reflective of a certain lived reality anticipates the concept of “francophone postcolonial studies” recently elaborated by scholars.

Nothing “francophone” or “postcolonial”—including their points of contact—has escaped interrogation and debate in recent decades, particularly within the British and American academies. While “francophone studies” typically refers to the study of primary texts written by French-speaking subjects of France’s
former colonies, “postcolonial studies” is attended by a wider pan-
oply of elements that include not only primary literature (much of it historically known as “Commonwealth literature”—texts from Britain’s former colonies and current protectorates) but also a theoretical apparatus drawing on a variety of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, Marxism, and feminism. As philosophers like Paulin Hountondji and critics like Emily Ap-
ter have pointed out, francophone studies is neither analogous to nor a subset of postcolonial studies.35 Whereas postcolonial the-
tory (and the category of postcolonial studies) grew out of a need for interpretative tools capable of accounting for the difference of Commonwealth literature, a parallel theoretical arm for franco-
phone literature has been slow to emerge.36

Like francophone and francophonie, “postcolonial”—as a cate-
gory of theory, criticism, and literature—has been subject to nearly incessant reformulation by practitioners and critics alike.37 In its temporal denotation, “postcolonial” (sometimes written “post-co-
lonial”) refers to the period after colonization, thus raising ques-
tions about whether or not the term is intended to account for all imperial moments in history and whether “post” refers to the time after the beginning of colonization or after its end (the inde-
pendence era).38 In academic discourse, inherent in postcolonial studies is a concern with reading cultural productions that ex-
press resistance to power structures and that “mediate, challenge or reflect upon . . . relations of domination and subordination.”39 Compared with “francophone” and “francophonie,” “postcolonial” and its various iterations present a significantly more complicated picture, precisely because the term itself has been so widely theo-
rized, challenged, and reified. It would be something of an ex-
ercise in repetition to rehearse here the critiques that have been leveled at the postcolonial, its theories, and its criticism, as many of the introductory essays to the multiple anthologies devoted to these questions parse the various nuances and ramifications of postcolonial, postcoloniality, and postcolonialism. While further
distinctions add complexity to an already multilayered problem, I am most interested here in the manner in which postcolonialism defines the objects of its study.\textsuperscript{40}  

Locating the moment of the inception of postcolonialism as a field of study is a task that leads, anecdotally, to two texts: Edward Said's \textit{Orientalism} (1978) and \textit{The Empire Writes Back} (1989), the collaborative effort of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Both texts constitute foundational moments in postcolonial studies; however, they differ in their objects of study and in their methodological approach.\textsuperscript{41} Said defines the concept of orientalism as a “dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires—British, French, American—in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced”; the eponymous text is an inquiry into the inner workings of cultural domination, founding and performing a type of postcolonial criticism that has come to be called “colonial discourse theory” (alternatively, “colonial discourse analysis”).\textsuperscript{42} Unlike francophone studies and other facets of postcolonial studies, Said’s branch of the discipline takes Western texts as its objects of study, looking for the Orient as it is created in the imaginary of the Occident. In Said’s own words, it is a project that “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”\textsuperscript{43}  

Working in a different vein, the writers of \textit{The Empire Writes Back} (1989) [hereafter \textit{ewb}] turn their attentions to the cultural productions of the formerly colonized. The trio of authors establishes its objects of study as “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.”\textsuperscript{44} “All the culture,” however, notably excludes productions originating from within the imperial countries, suggesting that the colonizer remained unaffected by the very process he had instigated and challenging, implicitly, Memmi’s assertion that the colonial situation deeply affected both the colonizer and the colonized. Since it was one of the first studies of its kind to confront the enormous enterprise of accounting for “theory and practice in post-colonial
literature” (as its subtitle indicates), it is perhaps not surprising that the working definition put forth by *EWB* has been widely critiqued and reformulated in the years since its first appearance.

Helen Tiffin, in her introduction to *Past the Last Post*, also identifies two lines of inquiry within postcolonial studies, the existence of which has led her to articulate what might be called the problem of the “double archive”:

The first archive here constructs [post-colonialism] as writing . . . grounded in those societies whose subjectivity has been constituted in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism—that is, as writing from countries or regions which were formerly colonies of Europe. The second archive of post-colonialism is intimately related to the first, though not co-extensive with it. Here, the post-colonial is conceived as a set of discursive practices, prominent among which is a resistance to colonialism, colonialist ideologies, and their contemporary forms and subjectificatory legacies. The nature and function of this resistance form a central problematic of the discourse.45

Like the approach of *EWB*, Tiffin’s first archive focuses on cultural productions by formerly colonized subjects; the second archive, however, is more ambiguous. Rather than identify a corpus of texts, Tiffin speaks of a “set of discursive practices.” One could assume, then, that the “postcolonial” might be located in any text that manifests resistance, regardless of the identity of the writing subject.

In any case (*Orientalism, EWB*, or Tiffin’s double archive), an interesting problem presents itself for the marriage of the postcolonial and the francophone. Whereas both twofold definitions of postcolonialism account for—or allow sufficient ambiguity to potentially account for—texts from two spaces (the metropole and the colony), the academic iterations of francophonie and francophone literature account for only one space: the colony. Fran-
cophone studies, in its current iteration, has not embraced the colonial discourse analysis tenets of postcolonial studies, nor has it fully turned its gaze upon the presence of the postcolonial in texts by French (*métropolitain*) authors.

Memmi’s prescience in the domain of francophone literature thus becomes apparent: although the vocabulary of the postcolonial per se had yet to emerge in France in 1985, Memmi was nonetheless positing—via his use of “francophonie” in his final anthology—a postcolonial vision of textuality, one capable of bringing together authors from two literary spaces. Through his preface to the 1985 anthology, Memmi offers an interpretation of the rubric of francophone literature that cuts across national and ethnic boundaries and suggests an inclusive concept of francophonie as a literary category and academic concept in which the writing subject’s difference is not inscribed a priori. This definition differs both from the original connotation of the term “francophone” and from the notion of francophonie that identifies a specific field of study within the contemporary academy.

Memmi’s position thus reflects a “double archive” of objects of study—productions of both the former colonizer and the formerly colonized—and this doubling at the same time anticipates the theoretical reworking of the term “francophone” by proponents of “francophone postcolonial studies”—a critical gesture that calls for the inclusion of “France” in the category “francophone,” thus transcending the colonizer-colonized binary. Francophone postcolonial studies aims to redeploy the categories of “francophone” and “postcolonial” so as to combat some of the gaps in both. As Charles Forsdick and David Murphy state in their essay “The Case for Francophone Postcolonial Studies,” it is necessary to revisit the terms in order to undo the “anglophone bias” of postcolonial studies and the “exclusionary gesture” of francophone studies, which has often “emphasized ethnic or racial ‘difference’ from a perceived ‘French norm,’ with metropolitan France rigorously excluded from [its] deliberations.”46 This framework seeks to in-
tegrate “French” literature into “francophone,” and in so doing it returns to the denominative meaning of the term, by emphasizing as francophone any text written in the French language. In this manner, francophone postcolonial studies implicitly recognizes the “double archive” of postcolonial studies and echoes Memmi’s particular concept of francophone.

Furthermore, Forsdick and Murphy’s marriage of the francophone and the postcolonial seeks to recognize a French specificity in what might be called the French university system’s “resistance” to the postcolonial: “Since the French revolution, French national identity has rested on the abstract notion of citizenship, which claims to transcend issues of race, gender, and class, in order to create a society of equal citizens. Many French intellectuals are deeply distrustful of any cultural development that appears to threaten the cherished ‘universal values’ of the Republic.”47 Historicizing French attitudes and recognizing the cultural particularities at play allow Forsdick and Murphy to put forth a “francophone postcolonial studies” that is not simply a French version of its British forerunner. They also reinvest in certain francophone authors, demonstrating and valorizing the manner in which writers like Fanon and Memmi were operating in a postcolonial mode before the advent of the term, thus making a convincing argument for a francophone basis to postcolonial studies and theory.

And yet, even as its “proto-postcolonial” dimension moved beyond national categories to encompass transnational constellations of texts, Memmi’s 1985 concept of francophone could not—and indeed did not try to—rid itself of the question of “authentic” representation of a certain lived reality, an element which today remains implicit in definitions of francophone literature. This runs counter to the criteria of postcolonial (often anglophone) literature, which, undoubtedly in part because of its closer association with postmodernism, tends to place far less emphasis on representation and verisimilitude.48 Despite the implication that the notion of francophone as a distinction of literary and subjective
alterity might be fruitfully eclipsed by allowing francophone to function differently, in Memmi’s paradigm the writing subject’s life must provide the empirical basis for his text. To write of the Maghreb, one must be “of” the Maghreb—and it is in the preposition of that Memmi’s transnational francophonie resides. That the insistence on the subject’s experience holds for both the colonized writer’s representation of autochthonous reality and the colonizer’s representation of the transplanted metropolitan community indicates an investment in the writing subject as the locus of meaning. In the broader field, both francophone and postcolonial studies have, historically, been significantly invested in the author’s biography—specifically his or her national, ethnic, or racial origins: “in the postcolonial ‘area of signifying convention’ the author’s race and his nationality are signs, as is the language in which he writes, the audience he writes for, and the literary or material rewards he expects.” Such a situation raises questions about the role of authorial subjectivity and identity in the determination of literary fields of inquiry.

It is this emphasis on the writing subject’s lived experience, and on the author as the site of production of meaning, that leads us to consider the category of “francophone” in the light of antisubjective theories that sought to evacuate or move beyond the primacy of the author. In this regard, the theory of francophonie implicit in Memmi’s prefaces poses a challenge to the discourse on “the death of the author” emerging in French intellectual culture in the 1960s.

The Death of the Francophone Author

According to contemporary conventional wisdom, the era of suspicion is over: the “I” is no longer an object of aversion; the subject has returned, along with the author. Such assertions might explain the centrality of the subject for francophone postcolonial literature and its critical apparatus. Indeed, the question of subjectivity, as Ashcroft has remarked, “lies at the heart of any exploration of political and cultural resistance, and the postmodern
rejection of Enlightenment notions of selfhood is a particularly significant issue for colonial subjects.” However, given the particular history of this relatively new literature and its relationship to critical theory, it is not clear that the returned subject (post–“death of the author”) and the subject at the center of francophone postcolonial literature are one and the same. In other words, whereas the subject questioned and temporarily exiled by the death of the author has now returned, the postcolonial subject has, in fact, never been questioned, never been metaphorically annihilated, and therefore may not be the same subject “resurrected” in and by contemporary theory.

The radical antiauthorialism and the antisubjective theories that came to the fore in the 1960s constituted a reaction to the renaissance of the Cartesian cogito in Husserlian phenomenology. While Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” (1967) was neither the first nor the most developed argument of its kind, it has nonetheless come to serve as a literary critical shorthand for describing a set of antiauthorial and antisubjective hermeneutics. The tone of the brief text originally published in English by the experimental journal Aspen owes more to the genre of the manifesto than to the philosophical essay or literary criticism—despite the fact that it is anchored in a close reading of Balzac’s “Sarrasine” and is a sketch for what would become S/Z.

The notion of the primacy of language over the subject, attributed to Mallarmé by Barthes, was to become, over the course of the century and as a result of Saussure’s work in linguistics and Lévi-Strauss’s work in anthropology, one of the major tenets of the Structuralist movement. Various factions of that movement (such as the Tel Quel group), as well as certain poststructuralist schools of criticism, pointed to language and the text as generative of meaning, thus logically unseating the author as the source of meaning. Notwithstanding the changes that have occurred in the landscape of literary criticism since the rise of high theory, and despite his own positional revisions, Barthes’s proclamation
of the death of the author remains a seminal moment in the history of critical theory. While a study of the relationship between francophone postcolonial literary production and the discourse of the death of the author need not necessarily focus exclusively on Barthes’s eponymous text, the choice to concentrate on “The Death of the Author” is rooted in its iconic status within the larger narrative of antiauthorial discourse and its historical relevance to the period in which Maghrebi cultural productions were emerging in France. Finally, in the context of writers from the putative periphery, Barthes’s essay is perhaps most poignant for what it does not say. As Seán Burke points out, the “tone, format, and ethos [of “The Death of the Author”] all suggest that a gesture of radical significance is being undertaken, that we are witness to an important moment in the transvaluation of Western values.” In this instance, the unspoken—the question of non-Western values—resonates loudly against the corpus of texts that constitute the Francophone canon.

Barthes’s declarative title has been read in the same light as, and indeed as an extension of, Nietzsche’s “death of God” and the subsequent Foucauldian “death of Man,” thus conferring upon “the Author” a synecdochal quality that allows it to stand for all authors. However, and despite the fact that the declaration does not single out the French or even the European author, the language of the text suggests that the critique is indeed directed at a particular type of authorial subject: “The author is a modern character, no doubt produced by our society as it emerged from the Middle Ages, inflected by English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation, thereby discovering the prestige of the individual, or, as we say more nobly, of the ‘human person.’ Hence it is logical that in literary matters it should be positivism, crown and conclusion of capitalist ideology, which has granted the greatest importance to the author’s ‘person’” (my italics). The author for Barthes is a historical figure with a distinctly occidental lineage, one who has come to individualism via a particular
trajectory (empiricism, rationalism, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and capitalism) that can only be recognized as European. This is further underscored by the possessive pronoun describing the society that produced the author: “our society” refers not to a global village that would encompass the entirety of humanity but a specific historical entity to which, as the possessive first-person plural indicates, Barthes himself belongs.

Areas of non-Western culture, however, are not completely evacuated from the essay, for Barthes distinguishes between different types of societies and their varying levels of “narrative” development. He notes, for example, that “in ethnographic societies, narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman, or reciter, whose ‘performance’ (i.e., his mastery of narrative code) can be admired, but never his ‘genius.’” A Euro-centric syllogism hovers in the subtext: if the author is a modern product of our (read: Western) society, born as a result of a particular set of historic and economic circumstances, then other societies or cultures which are not modern must not have authors. In other words, the narratives and other cultural productions of “primitive” (what Barthes calls “ethnographic”) societies, those who have yet to experience modernity, remain unburdened by the figure of the author.

My purpose here, however, is certainly not to accuse Barthes of Euro-centrism or to stage a longer argument about narrative and authorship in “ethnographic” societies (which, in fact, Barthes does not define in his text). What I do want to suggest is that the essay constructs a funeral pyre for a certain category of author, one that may well exclude authors like Memmi and, generally speaking, francophone postcolonial authors or writers from the periphery. For it cannot be determined from Barthes’s essay whether or not Memmi, hailing as he does from an “ethnographic” society, would be considered an author at all. In the particular case of Memmi, any authorial status attributed to him would be at once ambiguous and ambivalent: he takes part in both “our society”—insofar as European colonization brought him the language of Molière and an
imported literary canon to go with it—and in his culture of origin. At the same time, while belonging to both, he can never fully be either. Certainly this suggests an impasse that is reminiscent both of Memmi’s position in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and the organizing logic of his anthologies of the 1960s, as well as of his skepticism regarding the ability of the writer of hybrid identity to overcome his divided self.

Beyond the question of Barthes’s definition of the “author”—that is, whether or not a non-Western writer may be considered an author at all and, by extension, whether his text can be subject to the critical operations Barthes calls for—lie the larger issues implicit in the text. The discourse of the death of the author, even in its less radically antisubjective forms (such as New Criticism), seems to quite naturally question the ascendancy of representation. Indeed, movements that have sought to reject the author have often manifested what might be called an antirepresentational ethos. Conversely, a turn away from representation renders the question of the author null and void. As Burke summarizes: “When a text no longer speaks the language of representation, the death of the author becomes gratuitous. This is why the death of the author need never be raised in connection with writerly texts, why Barthes does not explain what purpose authorial extirpation might serve in the case of Genet, the later Joyce, Proust, Bataille, and others. . . . What Roland Barthes has been talking of all along is not the death of the author, but the closure of representation.”

This rejection of representation is a point of critical importance when confronting the francophone postcolonial text with the discourse of the death of the author. As demonstrated by the anthology selection criteria put forth in Memmi’s prefaces, the francophone text has been held to a high standard of “authentic” representation—one might even speak of a cult of representativity. And whereas Barthes reveals the artificiality of the “reality effect” in literature, the Maghrebi author is legitimized only by and through his (or her) performance of verisimilitude.
It is essential, then, to recognize that the criticism of the literature produced by the francophone postcolonial world seems to have taken little notice of the trends and changes in critical theory; it hewed, from its inception, to author-centered, representationalist interpretations. While we cannot know whether or not Barthes intended to include the productions of new francophone writers when he noted that “the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author,” his observation nonetheless rings true for those writers, their texts, and their critics.

By the end of the heady era that was the 1960s, a substantial amount of the raw material that would later coalesce under the rubric of francophone literature was already in circulation. A number of the now-classic works of francophone fiction and poetry were available to French (metropolitan) readers, and a movement to anthologize works by writers from the former colonies had already been initiated.61 Preceding Memmi’s 1964 and 1969 efforts by two decades, Leopold Sédar Senghor’s 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, published on the centenary of the 1848 revolution, claimed to show the French “that this revolution produced more fertile work than it is generally believed.”62 Yet serious critical work on this corpus of texts did not begin until the 1970s, at which point much of the scholarly criticism devoted to it was grounded in sociohistorical and psychological analyses—a phenomenon due in part to the fact that these essays were first introduced in anthropology or sociology, rather than literature, departments.63 In the burgeoning francophone field, no weight seems to have been given to Barthes’s complaint that “the explanation of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the author, which was transmitting his ‘confidences.’”64

Ironically, the critical attention devoted to francophone literature in an attempt to promote and disseminate it often portrayed
its texts in a reductive, schematic light, focusing on their representativity. A 1972 issue of *L’Esprit créateur* devoted to French-language literature from North Africa opens with an essay by Jean Déjeux, a central figure in French criticism of francophone North African literature. Déjeux categorizes francophone Maghrebi literary production into three groups. The first, which he terms a “literature of protest and revelation,” is linked to a group of writers known as the “1952 generation,” who produced “so-called ethnographic or documentary literature, largely autobiographical, a testimonial literature dealing with the harsh realities of the day or combat during the war of independence.” The second and third categories are represented, respectively, by “fairly conventional, traditional writers, both in content and in style. They write ‘good,’ ‘moral’ tales that nonetheless lack strength” and “a few writers whose approach amounted to aping the colonial text, preferring to go down that road rather than not be published at all.” It is significant that Déjeux’s categories depend on his perception of the writers’ intentions to produce a document of a certain reality. The experimental nature of many of the novels of this period is overlooked in favor of a summary of the “new” realities they depict. Déjeux, an autodidact, favored a sociohistorical and psychosocial approach to the literature of the Maghreb, a methodology that naturally seems to have skewed his investigation in the direction of the author as the sole generator of meaning and of verisimilitude as the primary criterion of literary quality.

Because any discussion of reception is necessarily fraught with the potential for contextual misunderstandings, and because the relative importance of a single critic is difficult to measure with objectivity and accuracy, I prefer to tread lightly when discussing Déjeux’s impact on the domain of francophone letters and, in particular, francophone Maghrebi literature. However, it is clear that from the 1970s until his death in 1993, Déjeux was one of the most prolific bibliographers and researchers working in Maghrebi literature in French; his work as a librarian for the *pères blancs* [white
fathers, or priests] in Algeria perhaps explains in part his propensity for bibliography. He published more than 20 monographs and 450 articles, served as a lecturer at the Centre international d’études francophones (CIEF), and left an indelible imprint on the many scholars who studied under his tutelage. That Déjeux’s approach, steeped as it was in sociohistorical and psychosocial methods, was for a certain period of time the principal mode of criticism of francophone Maghrebi literature may explain the persistence of the sociohistorical method in examining this literary field.

Working within the field of postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha is strongly critical of reading colonial texts as “realistic” or “representative” of a certain kind of reality—a “reality” that may in fact be a Western construct. He specifically points to reading for mimesis or authorial intention as a manner of recuperating meaning that forecloses the potential of texts of the post-colony:

To represent the colonial subject is to conceive of the subject of difference, of an-other history and an-other culture. This requires a notion of literary representation that does not conceive of the problem of representation as the presentation of different images of the colonial, some more progressive than others. It requires an end to the collusion of historicism and realism by unseating the Transcendental subject, the origin of writing as linear time consciousness. . . . It is crucial for our purposes that this does not permit meaning to be recuperable through a direct reference to the “origins” of mimetic reflection or authorial intention.

According to Bhabha, it is only by moving beyond these types of readings and the (unreasonable) demand for a transcendental “colonial” subject that a notion of representation not based on difference can be achieved.

It seems appropriate to conclude the discussion of Barthes’s essay with respect to the francophone postcolonial author by revisiting the conclusion of “The Death of the Author” through the lens
of Memmi’s contemporaneous adjudications in the anthologies. If Barthes’s attack on the author (as a bourgeois, capitalist model of authority) does not hold outside of a Western cultural and political matrix, then neither can “the birth of the reader”—the gesture that concludes the essay.71 Does it follow that if the author is a product of “our society,” then the reader, ostensibly born of the same situation, would also be a product of that same society? For if that is the case, and if the francophone author were to be declared “dead,” one must wonder what reader would be born to requite his passing. As Memmi has made clear, the reader (and critic) of the francophone text does not necessarily coincide—culturally, politically, linguistically—with its writer: “The North African writer, in the process of successfully expressing himself and certain new realities, has nonetheless not found his normal readership—that is, his true readership. Is it not paradoxical, even worrisome for the future of his work, that this writer, because he is francophone, cannot be understood in his own country?”72

The realization of the birth of the reader constitutes the final point of disconnection between Barthes’s manifesto and the situation of the francophone postcolonial writer. If the author in “ethnographic” societies is a master of narrative code but devoid of genius, it follows that the “ethnographic” reader/listener could appreciate the performance but not become the locus of the production of its meaning. This impossibility is amply revealed in Memmi’s demonstration of the Maghrebi writer’s noncoincidence with his “normal” readership (a readership composed of his compatriots), although it remains unclear as to why the North African writer would have but one “normal” readership. While francophone critics have rarely engaged the aporias revealed by the confrontation of the discourse of the death of the author with francophone postcolonial literary production, the work done by other subaltern groups, such as feminist theorists, may offer models for such an endeavor.
Feminist Theories: (Sub)Alternate Responses to the Death of the Author

While any comparative gesture between marginalized, or subaltern, groups is potentially fraught with the unfortunate (and usually unintended) consequences of evacuating the specificity of one camp in favor of the other or reinforcing the marginalization of the groups in question, drawing several careful lines of convergence between specific aspects of women’s writing and francophone writing is nonetheless a useful exercise.73 This is particularly pertinent in the study of responses to antiauthorialism, insofar as feminist critics are among the few to have directly challenged the notion of the death of the author in light of emerging subjective difference. Seán Burke has underscored the potential value of extending feminist theory’s responses to other groups: “The ‘re-materialism’ of female authorship and subjectivity in opposition to the transcendent subject of patriarchal aesthetics could also be extended to other marginalized subject groups whose difference to the ‘universal position’ is marked—questions of ethnicity and post-colonialism being of especial urgency here.”74 Indeed, “questions of ethnicity and post-colonialism” fall into lockstep with the present discussion of francophone writing, whose agents are often marked by ethnic difference or their status as colonial or postcolonial subjects. Insofar as the discourse of feminist literary theory may be broadly said to foreground subaltern subjectivity, it provides an interesting parallel to the case of francophone writers.

Feminist theory, however, has engaged with critical debates regarding the death of the author and authorship in ways that francophone studies has not. Furthermore, what is perhaps most useful about the feminist engagement with this concept is that it does not present a monolithic response to the critical imposition of an early death on a nascent writing subject; indeed, camps or individuals within feminist theory and criticism have produced nuanced and contradictory responses to the death of the author discourse. Di-
viding the feminist responses (and challenges) to the death of the author into two lines allows for a bivalent reading. Whereas certain theorists such as Nancy K. Miller have read the end of the author as a critical position anathema to the emergence of the feminine subject as author, and therefore to be rejected, others such as Toril Moi have interpreted the demise of the author as a positive critical maneuver. Comparing both attitudes to the situation of francophone criticism—as it has positioned itself in relation to questions of authorship and authority—reveals the challenges this literary field has faced in reacting to, and participating in, the wider discourse of critical theory.\(^75\)

In “Changing the Subject,” Miller argues that reading women’s writing in light of the death of the author is a dangerous, perhaps even impossible, interpretative gesture: “The post-modern decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not, I will argue, necessarily hold for women and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much self, ego, cogito, etc. Because the female subject has been juridically excluded from the polis, hence decentered, ‘disoriginated,’ and deinstitutionalized, her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from that universal position.”\(^76\) To liken Miller’s reading to francophone concerns, it is tempting to rewrite the above quotation by replacing “female” and “woman” with “francophone writer/subject.” The question thus becomes whether or not “the decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him [holds] for francophone subjects and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for francophone subjects.” Following this textual legerdemain, it could also be said that “francophone subjects have been juridically excluded from the polis, hence decentered in their relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority.”
That the excerpt from Miller’s text lends itself so handily to a reorganization in francophone terms may speak to a concern with the larger implications of Barthes’s treatise and Memmi’s situation with respect to antiauthorial discourse. Broadly interpreted, Miller’s argument posits the death of the author as a maneuver whose positive potential ran immediately amok: rather than create an opportunity to question the role and status of the author, it has foreclosed agency for women writers and the possibility of discussing identity—particularly subaltern identity—in writing. Contrary to Foucault, for Miller it matters who is writing, and that subject’s historical and political difference must be accounted for.

There is a temptation, then, to transfer Miller’s reading of Barthes to Memmi specifically and francophone texts in general; after all, the above rewriting resonates as a truism for the francophone postcolonial subject: his/her linguistic, administrative, and aesthetic dilemmas may indeed be gathered under the problem of his/her exclusion from the polis—the metropolis, in this case. As feminist theory and francophone writing came to the fore at roughly the same time as Barthes’s dismissal of the author, would it not be prudent to suggest the adoption of an anti—“death of the author” discourse when reading francophone literature? Is it not premature in the literary trajectory of the francophone author to exclude him/her, as a full writing subject, from discussions of his/her texts?

The rub, as it were, is that a focus on authorial identity and biography has been the hallmark of francophone criticism since its inception. Unlike feminist theory, however, francophone criticism has not located its preoccupation with the author as an oppositional maneuver designed to thwart the foreclosure of the agency of its writing subject; rather, francophone literary critics have largely avoided theoretical discussion of the author and questions of authority altogether in favor of a psychosocial or ethnographic approach to its objects of inquiry. In other words, if the tone of francophone criticism appears to amount to a stance similar to
that of Miller’s, it is important to remember that, in the absence of a true theoretical argument, this semblance is coincidental at best and lacks the rigor of a fleshed-out interpretative strategy.

Nancy Miller’s reaction to Barthes, however, is neither the last nor the only word in feminist criticism of the discourse of the death of the author. Contrary to Miller’s almost outright rejection of its validity, Toril Moi’s position embraces the liberating potential of the end of authority. In a passage of *Sexual/Textual Politics* worth quoting at length, Moi takes issue with Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s reading of Jane Austen in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

> the insistence on the female author as the instance that provides the only true meaning of the text . . . actually undermines Gilbert and Gubar’s anti-patriarchal stance . . . it seems inconsistent, to say the least . . . to proceed to write a book of over 700 pages that never once questions the authority of the female author. For if we are truly to reject the model of the author as God the Father of the text, it is surely not enough to reject the patriarchal ideology implied in the paternal metaphor. It is equally necessary to reject the critical practice it leads to, a *critical practice* that relies on the author as the transcendental signified of his or her text. For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin, and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of *authority*, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author.79

Gilbert and Gubar’s error, according to Moi, is one of substitution: by replacing a phallocentric discourse with an analogous female-centric discourse, they perpetuate rather than dismantle the apparatus of authorial domination over the text. Moi’s approach to the death of the author discourse, then, is less concerned with the gender of the bodies performing the act of writing than with appropriate, coherent, theoretical practices and codes.
To suggest a reading of the francophone field through Moi’s feminist-informed proclamation of the death of the author is a more ambitious endeavor than that of filtering francophone texts and authors through Miller’s feminist pro-authorial discourse. Whereas francophone criticism mirrors—superficially if not fundamentally—an interpretation like Miller’s by insisting that the subaltern writer’s identity be factored into the analytical equation, it has rarely produced an interpretation of its objects that does not hew to the cult of the author, to his/her biography and particular sociohistorical context. Questioning the primacy of the author and his or her hegemony over the text seems to have come under the order of a tacit interdiction: francophone criticism has yet to even consider “killing off” its authors. That feminist criticism was able to produce a variety of reactions to the discourse of the death of the author speaks to that field’s ability to allow for, and perhaps to foster, dissent and difference within its own ranks. I do not propose that francophone critics think through and then either accept or reject the discourse of the death of the author. What I am suggesting is a replication of feminist theory’s capacity to assimilate more than one version of this narrative.

The Return of the Francophone Subject?
The return of the subject having since been declared, a revisiting of the death of the author may at first appear unproductive or, worse, morbidly regressive. Here, however, I have sought to reinforce the benefit of reading the trajectory of literary history as meandering rather than as a phenomenon of perpetual forward motion. Albert Memmi—along with many of the writers today known as “francophone postcolonial”—joined the column at a moment when literary theory was perhaps not ready to march hand in hand with the newly decolonized. As a result, we are left with readings that account for the author without accounting for the evolution of theories on the author. Reading, rather than ignoring, this out-of-step rhythm is a useful way of understanding how twentieth-century
conceptions of the author may have been perceived as antithetical to francophone literary production, which (perhaps as a result) has remained centered on the subject.

When Barthes's essay is posited as a bellwether for antiauthorial discourse, the divergences with francophone postcolonial literary production and criticism become evident. It is nevertheless important to view Barthes's text in the context of its publication; the antiauthoritarian, antiestablishment, and antibourgeois climate in which “The Death of the Author” was written may not have appeared readily applicable to a field of literature that was anything but authoritarian, established, or bourgeois. Insofar as the discourse of the death of the author called for the removal of a central patriarchal figure, it is understandable that to embrace such an attitude might have appeared antithetical to the sociocritical situation of the emerging, newly postcolonial author who had yet to claim anything that might have been deemed a “central” or authoritarian position.

Another factor coloring the reception of antiauthorial praxis and theory may stem from the identity of those performing the criticism. In the context of a discussion of the death of the author and the questioning of the specificity of the writing subject, it is somewhat ironic to come back to the nature of the author (or critic, in this case) as generative of the meaning of the text (criticism). However, it is perhaps worth observing that feminist theory has been promulgated largely by female critics (women readers reading women writers or reading male writers in an attempt to identify and deconstruct a patriarchal discourse). Conversely, francophone postcolonial criticism has been practiced largely by subjects who are not, as defined by the academic category, “francophone.” As in the case of the author, it would perhaps be salutary to evacuate the critic’s gender and origin in favor of the reader’s meaning-making. In comparing feminist theory to francophone criticism, however, the lack of attention to these differences strikes me as negligent. Is it truly possible to posit that female critics read-
ing women’s writing is not a fundamentally different affair from that of metropolitan critics reading the texts (and thereby producing meaning) of their former subjects? What I am suggesting, however, is not that francophone criticism has necessarily perpetuated a colonial relationship with its objects of study; rather, in their desire to promote an emerging literature in a positive light, and perhaps in an attempt to avoid accusations of neocolonialism, francophone critics have been overly focused on the formerly colonized author to the detriment, at times, of textual analysis and theoretical questioning.

Any discussion of postcolonialism must necessarily take into account the question of its twin post:- postmodernity. While postcolonial literary artifacts are generally held to constitute part of the postmodern archive, it is unclear that the two posts may be so easily amalgamated. Indeed, if the postmodern condition is (in part) predicated upon the end of the “metanarratives,” one might wonder how to articulate the place and nature of francophone postcolonial narratives.82 Do they simply constitute “mini-narratives,” or are they a throwback to a bygone era? There is an inherent complexity in attempting to resolve the postcolonial into the postmodern. As Peter Childs and Patrick Williams have observed:

While postmodernism mounts an attack on the liberal humanist view of the individual, much postcolonialism is interested in affirming an alienated subjectivity. An opposition occurs, such that it has been argued that postcolonial identity is precluded by the very concept of postmodernity. Some critics have said that for this reason, postmodernism’s project has to be temporarily “put on hold” in relation to postcolonial studies, but it has been pertinently objected that this very articulation of the difference suggests another hierarchy in which the West’s theory is placed ahead of the rest of the world which, by implication, needs to catch up. It also reads postcolonialism in a particular way, homogenizing its
political aims into narratives which need (to recuperate denied) unified subjects and cultural practices which require anti-postmodernist forms: most commonly realist ones.  

Finally, in rehearsing, via Memmi, this history of literary francophonie as it relates to its authors, the postcolonial category, and the mainstream discourse of literary theory, it is possible to suggest several conclusions: (1) the category of francophone literature has, even in the wake of the death of the author, placed great importance on the author’s origins, biography, and intentions; (2) the author’s authenticity in representing a certain content and context, and the stakes of that representation, have been factors that define francophone postcolonial authors, much unlike the case in Western categories of national literature; and (3) taken together, these factors suggest that francophone postcolonial literary production has, from its arrival in the metropolis (and beyond), been out of step with critical theory as it is practiced within the Western canon. This discrepancy, however, need not necessarily imply that postcolonialism, or postcolonial writers, must “catch up.” Rather, any attempt at theorizing the subject and the author in francophone literature must necessarily recognize this critical gap and meet it with nuanced responses that historicize the works in question and operate outside of the stereotypical colonizer-colonized dialectic. Memmi’s theoretical work provides one example of how such binaries might be transcended. In the following chapter, I examine the ways in which Memmi’s oeuvre questions, appropriates, and reaches beyond another so-called binary: truth and fiction.
Writing Back to Whom?

Novel Strategies of Ambiguity and the “Mark of the Plural”

My fiction is this attempt at autobiography, weighed down under the oppressive burden of my heritage.


The mothers would repeat constantly: “Only the devil says I; only the devil eats alone; only the devil sleeps alone.” . . .

How to graft this insignificant ‘I’ onto the immense body of the tribe?


I’ve said I’m not a truthful soul but nor do I tell lies, which would come to the same thing.


Although his writing has alternated, continually and contrapuntally, between works of fiction and theoretical essays, Memmi made his debut on the international literary scene in 1953 with the publication of the award-winning novel *The Pillar of Salt*. Certainly, any rapid catalog of Memmi’s fiction is likely to turn up autoreferential themes and *topoi* that mirror the author’s life. *Pillar*, for instance, is a bildungsroman that recounts the struggles of protagonist Alexandre Mordechai Benillouche, a poor Tunisian Jew for whom the acquisition of French culture and language offers vital new possibilities while at the same time alienating him from his religious
group and social class. In Memmi’s second novel, *Agar* (1955), an unnamed protagonist returns home to Tunisia after spending several years in Paris studying to become a doctor. He is accompanied by his bride, Marie, a blonde Catholic woman from Alsace, who knows nothing of Tunisia nor of the Sephardic Jewish community into which she has married. *Agar* charts the downward spiral of a mixed marriage confronted with the impossibility of reconciling deeply embedded cultural differences. It would be more than a decade before Memmi’s next forays into fiction with the highly experimental novels *The Scorpion; or, The Imaginary Confession* (1969) and *Le désert; ou, les aventures de Jubaïr Ouali el-Mammi* (1977). Distinct from one another in numerous respects, the two novels nonetheless represent a moment of formal exploration in Memmi’s fiction, as they eschew linear narration, logical character development, and explicit historical and geographical contextualization. Like the novels that preceded them, elements of both works ostensibly betray some basis in the author’s own biography. At the end of the following decade, Memmi returned to a realist mode of representation with *Le Pharaon* (1988), a tale of the final, heady days before Tunisian independence, told in part through the diaries of its protagonist, Egyptologist Armand Gozlan. Of his six novels, only the most recent, *Térésa et autres femmes* (2004), is set entirely in Paris. It references the Tunisia of the author’s youth, however, through its staging of an annual dinner of expatriated lycée Carnot alumni. Less a coherent novel than a series of short stories each told by a different participant at the dinner party and held together by a narrative frame, *Térésa* is a modern recasting of Marguérite de Navarre’s *Héptameron* (or Boccaccio’s *Decameron* before it).

In light of such recurring motifs, and given the author’s own propensity to insist in interviews and personal essays that he “writes what he knows,” it is perhaps not surprising that Memmi’s general readership, as well as numerous works of criticism, have tended to conflate the author and his fictional characters. Memmi
himself blamed the failure of his second novel, *Agar*, on “readers’ uncontrollable habit of confusing the author with any and all of his protagonists, even when they contradict one another.”¹ Such instances of autobiographical interpretation, however, have not been limited to readings of Memmi’s fiction, but have extended to critiques of the entirety of his corpus (including his theoretical essays), a fact perhaps most remarkable for the occasions on which such intentionalist readings have willfully taken Memmi’s novels as their biographical basis. Writing about *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, for example, sociologist Edmond Jouve suggested that Memmi’s own bicultural struggles were pertinent to an understanding of the essay: “Albert Memmi himself tells us this secret: ‘after 15 years of Western culture, 10 years of conscious rejection of Africa, perhaps I’d better accept this truth. . . . I’m irredeemably a barbarian!’”² While Jouve correctly attributes this quotation to *The Pillar of Salt*, his analysis fails to note that the tirade about irredeemable barbarity is not a secret divulged by Memmi but rather a pronouncement by Benillouche, *Pillar*’s protagonist. Leveraging a passage from a novel to serve as biographical ballast not only for a description of its author but also for an analysis of the author’s theoretical writings, Jouve seamlessly merges fact and fiction, tacitly implying that despite its generic classification as a novel, *Pillar* is merely a thinly veiled portrait of its creator.

If Jouve’s amalgamation of fact and fiction were the lone instance of intentionalist or autobiographical reading of Memmi’s novels, or if the critical treatment of Memmi’s corpus were anomalous in Maghrebi literary studies, there would certainly be little cause to devote energy to probing this analytical misstep. Yet the cases of such autobiographical interpretation are legion with respect to Memmi and Maghrebi literature alike. Numerous studies and articles on Memmi have attributed narrators’ utterances to their author, correlated fictional characters to real-life individuals, or used episodes from Memmi’s novels to establish claims about his intellectual engagements and personal life.³ Likewise, criticism
of the Maghrebi francophone novel—particularly the first novels published by Memmi’s contemporaries, such as Driss Chraïbi’s *The Simple Past* (Morocco, 1954) or Mouloud Feraoun’s *The Poor Man’s Son: Menrad, Kabyle Schoolteacher* (Algeria, 1954)—has been tethered to a similarly essentializing set of interpretative practices. The result, in both cases, is a body of criticism that foregrounds the ethnographic and sociological value of the texts to the detriment—perhaps even the foreclosure—of their status as works of fiction.

While a deeper examination of what might be called an interpretative epidemic is clearly in order, a discussion of Memmi’s work can neither elide his (active) participation in blurring the generic status of his own novels nor omit his explicit characterization of writing as an ongoing project of self-analysis. Yet, through its generic ambiguity and the instability of the first-person pronoun it deploys, this body of textual material—novels, essays, personal interviews—engages with and challenges both traditional Western theories of autobiography (particularly those that view self-writing as a distinctly occidental practice) and prevailing ideas about postcolonial first-person narratives. The oppositional discourses within Memmi’s work in turn participate in broader theoretical dialogues relative to Maghrebi francophone literature and its complex relationship to generic classifications, postcolonial paradigms, and local cultural imperatives.

**Un Genre Faux ou un Faux Genre?**

**Novels Taken for Autobiography**

In discussing the work of life writing, Memmi declared autobiography both impossible (“Clearly you see that autobiography is a false genre: a life cannot be recounted”) and inevitable (“I will have devoted my entire work to writing my life, that is to say, I will have spent my life describing my life”). These comments—situated at the beginning and end, respectively, of Memmi’s book-length interview with journalist Victor Malka—suggest a theory of autobiography that crystallizes into an essential aporia: while a life
cannot be written (or recounted), Memmi has nonetheless spilled quantities of ink in an attempt to describe his own. In the same text he laments, “How do you explain to people . . . that there are no novels without fiction, without compression? . . . That I had used some personal facts, of course, but that I had also borrowed many?” Such metacommentary suggests Memmi’s implicit awareness of the fundamental contradiction at the heart of his literary production and signals the critic to “proceed with caution” when attempting to correlate textual representations and authorial experience. At the same time, it must be said that numerous ambiguities within Memmi’s and other Maghrebi francophone novels have undoubtedly contributed to generic quandaries, particularly in cases where their protagonists’ names appear to be lightly modified versions of the authorial signature. Participating in what Philippe Lejeune has labeled a tacit “pact” between author and reader, the nature of the protagonist’s name is a key factor in the designation of a text’s generic status. While it is true that novels such as Pillar, The Simple Past, and The Poor Man’s Son feature autodiegetic narrators whose names are nearly identical to those of their authors, in all three cases the existence of a novelistic pact and the absence of the paratextual elements necessary to conclude an autobiographical pact suggest that they cannot be placed unproblematically under the rubric of autobiography.

To illustrate the phenomenon under discussion, and to further underscore the claim that intentionalist critical practices have not been limited to Memmi’s work, it is useful to begin with a discussion of Chraïbi’s and Feraoun’s first novels. Reading The Simple Past as a “retrospective prose story that a real person tells based on his/her own existence” seems plausible given that the text initially appears to fulfill one of the major categories of autobiography: the author and the protagonist share the same name (Driss). Moreover, the fact that the action of the novel unfolds prior to Moroccan independence—a time during which the author, like the hero of the novel, would have been an adolescent—would add fodder to an au-
tobiographical reading. Driss Chraïbi, however, is distanced from his protagonist by virtue of the latter’s patronym, Ferdi, and this differentiation of the proper name is significant for Lejeune in that the former (Driss Chraïbi) refers to a juridical subject capable of placing his name on the cover of his text and, as a result, of taking responsibility for its enunciation. Driss Ferdi, despite his position as narrator of *The Simple Past* and apparent similarities to Driss Chraïbi, is nonetheless not onomastically identical to the author.9

In several of Chraïbi’s other works, his own ambiguity with respect to the “pact” established in *The Simple Past* muddles a purely autobiographical reading of the text. In the preface to his novel *Lâne* (1956), Chraïbi clarifies (or perhaps obfuscates): “Maybe I am Driss Ferdi.”10 “Maybe,” an adverb suggesting possibility but also doubt, functions more as a denial than as an affirmation of the autoreferential nature of the novel, and many years later, Chraïbi further complicated matters when he concluded the first volume of his memoirs with the following recollection of the genesis of *The Simple Past*:

> At the point when I crossed the threshold I had a brief revelation, very brief, very intense. And if I were to write *about all that I hadn’t lived*, all that I hadn’t been able to experience neither here nor in my native country—only in dreams and empty words. And what if the scale of values were reversed, with the ideals on the bottom and the earthly contingencies at the top? It was a crazy undertaking, with no way out, the type of thing that could radically change the course of my life. I knew it. The title was obvious: *The Simple Past*.11

Ironically, at the time of its publication, this tale about everything the author “had not lived” and “had not been able to experience” in his native land provoked a brutal response in Chraïbi’s Moroccan readership.12 The public uproar caused by *The Simple Past* was so virulent and the attacks on its author so personal that Chraïbi repudiated the novel.13 “*The Simple Past,*” wrote one critic, “was a
web of sacrilegious lies and a bad action.” The polemic stemmed largely from an understanding of the text as an autobiography and a “true” story, an unflattering portrait of family and social dynamics in 1950s Morocco, as experienced by the author. It is something of a paradox, then, that readers preferred to understand the text as a set of lies rather than as an exercise in fiction. Responding, in a letter that could only be qualified as repentant, to a hotly critical article titled “Driss Chraïbi, assassin de l’espérance” [assassin of hope], Chraïbi took pains to explain to his critics that the novel was not, as it had been read and misinterpreted, an autobiographical tale. Notwithstanding such efforts, the author’s practice of naming his characters after members of his own family appeared to baldly contradict his statements regarding the genre of the work, thus compounding the difficulty of convincing the reading public that The Simple Past was anything but a mimetic representation of his own life. Despite Chraïbi’s best efforts to combat received ideas about autobiography and fiction, he was ultimately confronted with the fact that the assumption of autobiography had resolutely trumped the possibility of fiction.

Like The Simple Past, Feraoun’s The Poor Man’s Son has more often than not been understood as the author’s autobiography; however, the Algerian novel (whose pact is established on the cover page) is narrated not by Mouloud Feraoun but by a protagonist named Fouroulou Menrad. Similar to the case of “Driss Ferdi,” where the patronym differentiated character from writer, the anagrammatic name Fouroulou Menrad both links the character to his author and creates a distinction between the two. In his study on Feraoun and autobiography, Maurice Le Rouzic argues that the ambiguity of this mysterious anagram, when considered alongside the author’s subsequent texts and his correspondence with Franco-Algerian writer Emmanuel Roblès, casts the autobiographical nature of The Poor Man’s Son in a far less definitive light. Describing the text in a letter to Roblès, Fearoun called it “a semi-autobiography,” and in a letter to another friend, he wrote: “You know that
Fouroulou is more or less me.” According to Le Rouzic, the qualifying terms “semi” and “more or less” infuse Feraoun’s discourse with uncertainty, preventing the novel from being understood as an autobiography in the classic sense. In addition to overlooking these markers of doubt, proponents of autobiographical reading have failed to consider its unorthodox narrative structure. Indeed, only the first part of the novel, titled “Family,” is written in the first person; a second narrator, described as “a friend who will not betray him” and “a curious and chatty brother,” takes over the storytelling reins partway through the text. The “chatty brother” who appears at the beginning of the novel’s second section (“The Elder Son”) finishes Fouroulou’s story for him, writing alternatively to him in an epistolary mode (that is, in the second person) and about him (in the third person). Finally, the surname Menrad could in turn be read as an anagram of “Menard”—a reference to Pierre Menard, Borges’s famous “author of the Quixote” and a literary emblem of the unreliability of authorial identity—thus creating an intertextual link to the pseudonym of another famous teller of tales.

_**Pillar**_ has not escaped the fate of the first novels of Memmi’s contemporaries, although protagonist Alexandre Mordekhaï Benillouche is nominally even further distinct from Albert Memmi than Fouroulou is from Mouloud. The first-person narrator and protagonist bears a name that can be linked back to the author by virtue of the first two initials (AM = Albert Memmi). The hero’s three names, moreover, may be interpreted as harnessing a troika of cultural heritage that is identical to Memmi’s: European, Jewish, and Arabo-Berber. Nonetheless, just as in _The Simple Past_ and _The Poor Man’s Son_, numerous other elements of the text, as well as the author’s own ulterior comments—such as the epigraph that asserts “a life cannot be recounted”—suggest that the character is as different from Albert Memmi as he may appear similar to him. It is therefore striking that critics have marshaled certain diegetic elements from _Pillar_ to underscore biographical fact, while ignor-
ing others not grounded in Memmi’s life. If a reader, for example, were to use _Pillar_ as an index of Memmi’s childhood and coming of age, what would be made of the narrator’s failure to pass the _agrégation_, or his departure for Argentina at the end of the text? While no critic has suggested that Memmi failed his _agrégation_ or renounced Tunisia in favor of South America, neither has anyone suggested a strategy which would account for this mélange of fictional and nonfictional details.

The ambiguity of the proper name in the novel is but one of many ways of recasting the autobiographical readings of Memmi’s novels in the more accurate light of fiction; indeed, a variety of factors combine to produce an inherent tension in the subject position and reveal a corpus of texts that resist intentionalist interpretation. A recurring theme throughout Memmi’s writing (including novels, essays, and _récits_ is the necessity for the narrator to establish certain facts regarding his coming into the world. Beginning with _Pillar_ in 1953 and until the publication of his intellectual autobiography _Le nomade immobile_ in 2000, Memmi continually returns to a description of the place and context of birth—sometimes that of a fictional character and sometimes clearly his own, but nonetheless a deliberate invocation of a particular space, place, and time. A close reading of the various descriptions of his entry into the world reveals that the “facts” provided do not always correspond to the generic determination of the text; that, with the passage of time, Memmi provides more, and more precise, information about this event, the advent of which destabilizes previous assertions; and that the indeterminacy of origins—be they Memmi’s or the protagonist’s—are an integral part of an overall oppositional strategy to resist both identification and classification.

On the first page of _Pillar_ Alexandre Mordekhaï Benillouche describes his childhood dwelling: “We lived at the end of the Tarfoune Impasse in a little room where I was born one year after my sister Kalla.”\(^\text{20}\) The Tarfoune Impasse makes a second appearance in Memmi's third novel, _The Scorpion; or, The Imaginary Confes-
sion, published sixteen years later. In a manuscript left behind by the character Emile—a writer who has disappeared under mysterious circumstances and whose brother, Marcel, has been charged with organizing his hodgepodge of remaining texts—we discover the following information about the early days of his family: “We were still living in the Tarfoune Impasse, in a perfectly quiet district filled with the ceremonious scorn of each person for all the others; this carefully defined ritual of mutual mistrust and politeness was enough to keep everyone in his or her place.”

An intentionalist, or an autobiographic, interpretative framework would necessarily read these references to the Tarfoune Impasse as allusions to a real place, an impasse that exists—or that existed in Memmi’s youth—in the Jewish ghetto of Tunis. Such an interpretation might perhaps find validation in Memmi’s 1985 autobiographical essay Ce que je crois (What I believe), in which a description of his early years in Tunis leads the reader to believe that “Tarfoune” is indeed an actual Tunisian toponym: “I was supposedly born, simultaneous, at the Tarfoune Impasse, in a hammam, and at the beach—although sometimes the order changed. My mother was not a liar; she must have been mixing up her children’s births. The story of the contractions that came on suddenly while she was swimming—at the beach or at the hammam, there was always water involved—must have had to do with my younger sister. As for the impasse, half of us were born there: me or one of my siblings.” If at first this nonfictional account of his birth seems to provide the means for identifying Memmi with his characters Benillouche and Emile (also born at the Tarfoune Impasse)—and thus validating the autobiographical reading of those novels—a closer look at the passage begins to cast a shadow over the accuracy of this interpretation and the source of the information. Memmi’s mother, arguably the only “character” capable of establishing this type of information with any objective certainty, is revealed to be an unreliable narrator of the story of the birth of her own children. Through his representation of his mother as

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an unstable repository of her children’s biographies—she prefers, instead, to weave the “facts” concerning the birth of her children into a set of ever-morphing tales—Memmi comments on the impossibility of recounting a life story and thus underscores his notion that “a life cannot be recounted.”

The brothers Emile (sometimes called Emilio or Imilio) and Marcel relate a similar type of confusion in *The Scorpion*. Published more than a decade before *Ce que je crois*, the novel prefigures the factual ambiguity regarding the place and details of birth. Still reading his brother Emile’s manuscript, Marcel stumbles upon the following notation: “I was born at La Goulette, a little Berber port near the capital, a few hundred paces from the Walls and Fort of Charles V, which are still standing.” Several pages later, Marcel responds to a slew of errors or misrepresentations that he has noted in his brother’s story: “It’s not Imilio who was born at La Goulette, it’s me!” Although La Goulette is indeed a port not far from central Tunis, it becomes, like Tarfoune, another disputed birthplace.  

In his essayistic works, including those that treat universal themes such as dominance, dependence, or anti-Semitism, Memmi posits his place of birth as a founding element of his texts, a gesture which, in the context of the essay, suggests an autobiographical impulse, for he writes himself into the fabric of a larger set of problems. *Portrait of a Jew*, the first of a two-volume work on the condition of Jews, begins as follows: “I was born in Tunis, in Tunisia, two steps from that city’s large ghetto. My father, a harness-maker, was somewhat pious.” A decade later, having already published *The Scorpion*, the second volume of his study on Jews (*The Liberation of the Jew*, 1966), and a treatise on domination (*Dominated Man: Notes towards a Portrait*, 1968), Memmi counts on having acquired a certain capital with his readers when he opens his essay *Jews and Arabs* in the following manner: “Those readers who do me the kindness of reading my work know that I was born in Tunis, in Tunisia, in a very old community whose es-
tablishment, or conversion, goes back further, so they say, than the arrival of the Arabs in the Maghreb and much further still than the arrival of the various waves of Europeans.”

“I was born in Tunis, in Tunisia”: the anaphora resonates within Memmi’s work with a mantra-like quality, an opening invocation without which the act of writing would not be legitimated and its product might fall into a state of disfavor or, worse, disgrace. The repetition also appears to function as a textual talisman, protecting the writing—and its author—from an as-yet unidentified external threat.

Be it the fictitious Tarfoune Impasse, the real port town of La Goulette, or the simple reference to the Tunisian capital and its Jewish ghetto, La Hara, the question of birthplace is a nodal point in Memmi’s work. In his interview with the author, Victor Malka attempts to parse the intention behind Memmi’s insistence on the specificity of his place of birth:

Victor Malka. You were born in La Hara, the Jewish section of Tunis, more precisely, on the outskirts of La Hara. . . . What is the importance of this place and this detail?

Albert Memmi. Well, you can see that the tough part is just beginning: it is true that I have insisted on this place, and with detail. . . . The fact of having been born in Tunis, in the ghetto or on its outskirts, has certainly been a determining factor.

In his response, Memmi avoids offering supplementary information that might help the interviewer better understand his intention; rather, it is clear that the place of birth, or the location of origins, is synonymous with “the beginning of trouble.” This is strikingly uncharacteristic of the writer who so often in his essays appears determined to posit the facts of his life as foundational moments for his writing. The tendency to dodge questions that might lead to a (perhaps unwanted) revelation would appear to be a counter-maneuver to the one in which Memmi reveals repeatedly, albeit with shades of nuance, certain pieces of biographical information.
Returning to the question of the Tarfoune Impasse, it is once again Malka who attempts to bring accuracy and fact to the ambiguity perpetuated in Memmi’s work over the years, and it is Memmi, in the mode of artful dodger, who refuses to provide a key to understanding:

**ALBERT MEMMI.** My father-the-saddlemaker, my-father’s-store, these stories follow in the footsteps of the Tarfoune Impasse where I was born.

**VICTOR MALKA.** What is the real name of the Tarfoune Impasse? I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned it anywhere. . . .

**ALBERT MEMMI.** My father’s store was another magic cavern where my sensitivity developed.²⁷

Nowhere in the long paragraph that follows Memmi’s response (of which only the first fragment is reproduced here) does he begin to address the direct question posed by his interviewer, and yet through this non-dit and the elisions it contains, several important elements are revealed. Once again in a nonfictional document such as the interview (whose purported intention is to reveal facts about a given subject), Memmi makes reference to the Tarfoune Impasse, a place where he may or may not have been born. Here, however, Malka’s question carries within it the suggestion that “Tarfoune” may be an invention rather than an actual Tunisian toponym. By harnessing the power of the unspoken as an evasive maneuver, and offering a response that does not in fact address the question posed, Memmi conspires in the creation of a cloud of doubt around the origin of Tarfoune. The reader is left to speculate as to which part of Tarfoune Impasse is an invention. Is there actually an impasse that simply bears a different name? Or is the so-called impasse an interpretative dead end?

The ramifications of Tarfoune’s fictionality go beyond the confirmation of Benillouche’s and Emile’s status as fictional characters born in a fictional place: it also calls into question the already complicated statement by Memmi in *Ce que je crois* whereby he
names “Tarfoune Impasse” as one of his (or his siblings’) possible birthplaces. In what is intended to be an intellectual autobiography, has the author introduced an element of fiction? And if so, what impact does this have on the status of the entire text? Finally, Memmi’s refusal to answer or even acknowledge the question posed by Malka opens a wide chasm of doubt about all previous “Tarfoune” references and Memmi’s insistence, throughout his oeuvre, on the necessity of establishing and naming a place where he (or his protagonist) came into the world.

The plot thickens, once again, with two of Memmi’s longer essays, both of which seem to have been devised as intellectual autobiographies. *Le juif et l’autre* (1995) and *Le nomade immobile* (2000) fulfill many of the criteria for autobiography: the narrator and the author are clearly one and the same, and there is no general attempt to fictionalize the events recounted. On the contrary, both texts are divided into chapters whose titles indicate a subject of philosophical inquiry (“Fécondités de l’exil” [The richness of exile] or “Le besoin de l’autre” [The need for the other], for example) and biographical detail is combined with personal anecdote to anchor the broader reflection. In the first chapter of *Nomade*, for the last time (to date) in his literary career, Memmi returns to the place of his birth:

I was born on a rainy December 15 at 8 o’clock in the morning at number 4, Tronja Impasse, rue Vielle-Tronja in Tunis, Tunisia, son of Fradji Memmi and Maïra Sarfati... Nobody could tell me why my birthplace bears the name of an exotic fruit, the tronja. I do know, however, why my father decided to set up house in this no man’s land between the Arab and Jewish neighborhoods. As a saddle-maker, his clientele was mainly made up of carters from Gabès whose *fondouk*—collective residence—was located right on the rue Tronja, two steps away from the neighborhood where the Maltese coach drivers lived. So, the “others” came into my life very early on, and they would never leave.28
This passage lays bare a preoccupation not only with the identification of a particular place of origin but also with that origin’s detailed geographical situation (house, street, city, country, environs) and its implications for genealogy, etymology, and identity. While the reasons for the street’s name remain mysterious—even for the author, as he would have us believe—the existential symbolism of the setting is swiftly unpacked. The author’s identity is inscribed in the very site of his birth, a place that is untranslatable to the reader and marked by nonbelonging: it is a liminal space, belonging to neither the Arab quarter nor the Jewish quarter; it is not quite the same and not quite other, a site of mixity and difference.

Returning to the path that led us from the “impasse Tarfoune” to the “rue Tronja,” it is clear that the symbolism of the passage from Nomade aligns with the current discussion regarding the ambiguity of place. Although the substance of the mantra “I was born in Tunis, in Tunisia” is maintained, the name of the impasse has changed and a specific street number has been provided. What is the reader to make of this supplementary information: Are we to understand “tronja” as the Arabic (or Judeo-Arabic) version of “tarfoune”? Has Memmi simply been translating for us all these years? Are there actually two impasses, or is one of them an exotic fruit of the author’s imagination?

While it is tempting to read this opening paragraph of Memmi’s most recent “official” autobiography as the final version, the one that contains the “real” story, the multiplication of biographical detail backfires when read in the light of other passages where Memmi recounts the day of his birth. More information, paradoxically, leads only to greater ambiguity. In Ce que je crois, Memmi clearly acknowledges a tactical, practical difficulty in establishing his origins with precision: following the revelation that his exact place of birth is unknown or even unlocatable, he also claims that ingrained cultural attitudes and traditions render such knowledge not only inaccessible but impossible:
At any rate, this business of civil status didn’t interest my mother: she didn’t have a status anyway—in her day births weren’t even registered. They were barely registered for people of my generation either. In the Tribe it was not common practice to declare the arrival of a new-born right away, and it was generally done inexactely in the hopes of keeping evil spirits and the evil eye at bay. Evil spirits notwithstanding, what does it really matter if I were born on a Monday, Tuesday, or a Friday, at 9 in the morning or at 11 at night? Anyway, I know neither the date nor the exact time of my birth. Besides, born in Tunis, Tunisia, to François Memmi and Marguerite Sarfati . . . I should have been named Abraham, after my venerable grandfather: it wasn’t possible.30

Memmi goes on to explain that his father was forced, by the ill humor of a Muslim civil servant who refused to register the Jewish name Abraham, to name his first-born son Albert, an “occidental” equivalent. Even though this passage confronts the question of time rather than that of place, recalling the earlier story of his mother’s vague assertions about her son’s birthplace, we can assume that this is the continuation of a related trope of ambiguity. The mantra is once again the same, but the facts have changed. The passage from Ce que je crois casts the accumulation of precise details in the opening paragraph of Nomade as an overcompensation on Memmi’s part for his inability to formulate a civil status for himself with any degree of certainty. A fictional origin seems to be grafted into the space of the missing origin, an operation all the more suggestive in that the fiction is set into a text that proclaims its autobiographical status. And perhaps because he decided to invent a birthday complete with time of birth and meteorological conditions, Memmi makes a trade with the reader by providing her with at least one genuine clue: the “real”—if untranslated—name of the Tarfoune Impasse. Finally, reading the two passages alongside one another also reveals a new wrinkle of ambiguity:
in *Nomade*, in addition to the re-scribing of the conditions and place of his birth, Memmi identifies his parents by their Jewish names, Fradji and Maïra. In the version related in *Ce que je crois*, the couple is designated by names decidedly more French: François and Marguerite.

As we have seen, Memmi plays hard to get most obviously in his interview with Victor Malka. The interview format, in addition to being a privileged site of authorial self-fashioning, makes it possible to pinpoint the moments when the author prefers to dodge the question or defer the answer. For example, Memmi has created a sort of nom de guerre, or code name, for his wife, whom he refers to as “Marie”—the same name given to the heroine of *Agar*. Like *Pillar*, *Agar* has been used as a source of biographical reference for Memmi’s life to such an extent that numerous articles and essays refer to Memmi’s wife as “Marie,” despite the fact that her name is Germaine (née Dubach). Moreover, in writing about *Agar* or Memmi in general, critics have been undaunted in their intentionalism by the fact that the real Memmis did not suffer the same fate as their fictional doppelgängers, torn apart by the cultural differences that confront them when they return, married, to the narrator’s hometown of Tunis. Albert and Germaine Memmi, after spending several years in pre-independence Tunis, returned to Paris where they established their careers, raised their children, and remained together despite their cultural and religious differences.

It would seem, however, that Memmi has played an active role in perpetuating the myth surrounding his wife’s name and in blurring the generic status of *Agar* (and, by extension, other elements of his corpus). In the interview with Malka, he describes his first stay in Paris and the circumstances under which he met the woman who would become his wife:

**ALBERT MEMMI.** I met my future wife [at the university residences] and three months later we set a date for our wedding.
Malka, seasoned player of this game, has the presence of mind to ask the important question; Memmi admits to the artifice while at the same time imposing it on his opponent, and the game continues on Memmi’s terms. As a worthy opponent, Malka agrees to the new rules (he continues the interview), aware, and through his questions making the reader aware, that he is navigating in a hybrid world where fiction and reality intermingle—at times to the point of being indistinguishable.

In reading passages from Memmi’s novels, essays, and interviews alongside one another in a nonchronological continuum, a certain autobiographical impulse seems to emerge. Elements that reveal information about the self, particularly about the indeterminacy of that self, abound, thus appearing to corroborate the author’s declaration that he has spent his life writing his life. However, as in the case of the proper name, the ambiguity surrounding the purported verisimilitude of Memmi’s texts undermines attempts at reading them referentially. The variations of subjective identity that Memmi deploys reveal an equally weighty impulse to fiction, which inscribes itself as a metatext of the autobiographical discourse and comments upon the impossibility of autobiography as such. If Memmi’s statement that “a life cannot be recounted” holds true, then how might we account for the persistent foreclosure of fiction in Maghrebi francophone literature?

In the “Ghetto of Autobiography”:
Literary and Historical Contexts

The foreclosure of fiction in Maghrebi literature may be akin to a phenomenon hinted at by Tahar Ben Jelloun when he declared
that Lofti Akalay’s *Les nuits d’Azed*—a contemporary retelling of *The Thousand and One Nights*—heralded the Maghrebi novel’s emergence from “the ghetto of autobiography.”\textsuperscript{33} Despite his use of a term freighted with numerous semantic possibilities and his suggestion that a moment of literary conjuncture is at hand, Ben Jelloun sidesteps an opportunity to theorize the Maghrebi francophone text and offers no further explanation as to how Akalay’s novel augurs this particular exodus. (However, as a reprisal of a set of tales told by multiple anonymous narrators in several languages, *Les nuits d’Azed* necessarily eschews first-person narration; furthermore, like the original, the novel’s polyphony undermines the stability of a single authorial persona, stymieing any attempts to correlate characters and the author.) Thus Ben Jelloun leaves the concept of the “ghetto of autobiography” open to interpretation: while it may be the result of a particular writing practice—an affinity for first-person narration and realism—it might also be a product of a given critical practice, of a blind spot to the strategies of ambiguity embedded in the Maghrebi francophone novel.

Regardless of its underlying causes, the symptom identified by Ben Jelloun is clearly a chronic one. Even if Memmi’s fiction could be considered autobiographical, the paradigm shifts in French literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly with regard to autobiography and the novel, should have offered alternatives to the persistently narrow construction of Memmi’s novels (and of the Maghrebi novel more generally).\textsuperscript{34} Despite the emergence of “new” forms of autobiography (such as *autobiographie nouvelle*, autofiction, autonarration, pseudo-autobiography, or autography), few, if any, autodiegetic texts from the Maghreb have been considered within these frameworks.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, the notion of autobiography as a writing and critical praxis—that is, as an interpretative tool and not simply a genre—has not been engaged within the Maghrebi literary space.\textsuperscript{36}

In stark contrast to the multiplication of categories of “self-writing” within French literature and literary criticism—which allowed
for an appreciation of their porosity and the recognition of the role of fiction in autobiography—in francophone postcolonial literature debates have remained somewhat essentialist, limited to whether or not writers from the colonial and postcolonial milieu are capable of producing “Western” forms of literature such as novels and autobiography. As such, the story of Maghrebi literature trapped in the “ghetto of autobiography” finds its origins in three conflicting critical trends existing in a state of methodological gridlock: the denial of the possibility of authentic francophone postcolonial autobiography; the assertion that autobiography—and not fiction—is the sole literary genre that the francophone postcolonial subject is capable of producing; and the premise that autobiography serves as a foundational genre in the domain of francophone postcolonial literature.

Some of the earliest scholarship on colonized and postcolonial autobiography—grounded in the historical origins and evolution of the genre—rejects the very possibility of authentic, original third world autobiography. Rooted in the Christian tradition that holds St. Augustine’s *Confessions* as a founding example—although at times Montaigne’s *Essays* and Rousseau’s *Confessions* are cited as originary autobiographical projects—autobiography reached a first pinnacle in Europe during the Enlightenment, where the primacy of the individual allowed for a full deployment of the self and its concomitant “I” in literature.37 Given its origins and practice within a particular cultural sphere, theorist Georges Gusdorf qualifies autobiography as a distinctly European-occidental genre,

a late phenomenon in Western culture, coming at that moment when the Christian contribution was grafted onto classical traditions. Moreover, it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other
cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. When Gandhi tells his own story, he is using Western means to defend the east.³⁸

Gusdorf’s theory of autobiography as “expressing concerns peculiar to Western man” does not forbid the non-Western subject access to autobiography, nor does it preclude his practice of the genre: a figure such as Gandhi (to use Gusdorf’s example) is indeed capable of telling his own story. However, the vehicle employed in this endeavor (the “Western means”) renders the story in question inauthentic, incapable of amounting to anything other than the mimicry of a form that is not organically available to the non-Western writer. Gandhi’s autobiography—and by extension, the autobiography of any subject from the third world or postcolonial space—would then be an admission of his own intellectual and cultural annexation.

Unlike Gusdorf, James Olney suggests in Tell Me Africa that autobiography is both fundamental and ubiquitous in colonized and postcolonial writing. Olney’s study, which focuses exclusively on Africa, gathers together under the rubric of autobiography a wide swath of writing in a variety of languages, asserting that “much of the best literature from Africa generally is—in a strict as well as in a loose sense of the word—autobiographical.”³⁹ He argues that it is to literature that the Western reader turns for the picture that he seeks of how Africans live and hence for an understanding of what they “believe in” and think. Autobiography, which is the literary mode just described (how an individual or a group lives, as recorded from within) is thus seen to provide . . . the most direct narrative enactment and immediate manifestation of the ways, the motives, and the beliefs of a culture foreign to the reader. The picture derived will be more comprehensively valid if we take “autobiography” to include “autobiographical” writings—“autobiographical”
fashion, “autobiographical” ethnography, “autobiographical” sociology and philosophy—as well as books that bear the title An Autobiography.\textsuperscript{40} The wide net cast across literary genres is troubling, for if, as Olney states, “autobiography and fiction come more or less immediately out of the same social matrix,” any text that claims to be fiction is also necessarily an autobiography, and no distinctions between the two hold currency. Equally troubling is the notion that autobiography and art are somehow mutually exclusive: “It is true, of course . . . that some novels cannot be judged works of art at all and it is equally true that there are a few books (\textit{L’Enfant noir, Down Second Avenue, Road to Ghana}) that must be called works of art while being, nevertheless, autobiographies.”\textsuperscript{41}

Through such critical gestures, Olney not only conflates genres but also amalgamates disparate parts of a continent made up of myriad languages, cultures, and histories. When he writes that “to look at one aspect of Gikuyu life . . . is to look at the whole: the whole continent is concentrated in every part and each part fully embodies the whole,” he deploys an essentialist logic and a rhetoric of synecdoche that denies the heterogeneity of African experience and culture.\textsuperscript{42} Olney’s maneuver appears to be based more on a desire to conveniently organize “African literature” into a single, easily manipulated package than on a consideration of the essential porosity of the definitional limits surrounding autobiography and other forms of writing. Moreover, it consigns the literary production of an entire continent to a destiny devoid of fiction.

The visions of postcolonial literature presented by Gusdorf and Olney—marginalizing on the one hand, totalizing on the other—are somewhat attenuated by a third critical mode, which I refer to as “foundationalist.” Critics Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, in their work on francophone postcolonial writing, have exemplified this mode through their contention that the first novels by writers such as Chraïbi, Feraoun, Memmi, Camara Laye (Guinea),
and Ahmed Sefrioui (Morocco) are autobiographies: “When, in the final phase of colonization, francophone authors from countries in the process of liberation raised their voices, they often chose the genre of autobiography. This act of self-discovery and of self-affirmation, which took its first literary steps in the language of the colonizer, became the foundational texts of the new emerging literature.” While their claim is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the genre and nature of these so-called foundational texts, what is more interesting to retain from Hornung and Ruhe’s argument is their positioning of autobiography as the genre through which colonial and postcolonial writers gain access to the “republic of letters.” This conception of autobiography is diametrically opposed to its function in Western culture and letters, where it is broadly conceived as a cumulative work that looks back over a life to engage in its analysis and thus is typically written toward the latter part of an author’s career. (We might think, for example, of Serge Doubrovsky’s comment that autobiography is “a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the dusk of their lives.”) Hornung and Ruhe posit an inverted process for the Maghrebi francophone writer, for whom autobiography functions as the founding gesture of the corpus. Le Rouzic makes this inversion even more explicit: “Contrary to the occidental autobiography in which the analysis of a life is done at a point when the writer is old and has nothing left to lose, a large number of Maghrebi ‘autobiographies’ are the fruits of youth, a kind of entry visa for life, a risky move for the author.” The “foundational” approach to postcolonial literary criticism allows the genre to be practiced by non-Western writers without labeling their entire production as autobiographical, while at the same time acknowledging that it has evolved differently due to the particularities of the cultural and historical context. As compelling as it may seem, however, this argument is undermined by its reliance on an erroneous classification. Like Déjeux, Hornung, Ruhe, and others, Le Rouzic bases his claim of “foundational autobiography” on the first publica-
tions of Memmi, Chraïbi, Feraoun, and others, which, in fact, are works of fiction. Le Rouzic’s curious use of scare quotes around the term “autobiography” when applied to Maghrebi cultural productions (occidental autobiography, on the other hand, appears without qualifying scare quotes) suggests an awareness of this dilemma and of the problematic nature of the term in certain contexts. Although Le Rouzic leaves these terminological questions unprobed, his hesitation to make a categorical assertion might be read as an invitation to explore the slippery slopes of the generic definitions at work.

Whereas Gusdorf and Olney put forth visions of non-Western autobiography that contradict one another (the first claiming the impossibility of autobiographical production, the second touting its ubiquity), they share a common underlying rejection of authorial agency. The “foundationalist” theorists (exemplified by Hornung and Ruhe) allow for the possibility of literary self-representation without dooming all francophone postcolonial literature to the same fate; nevertheless, their qualification of many Maghrebi novels as autobiography is effectively incorrect. “Autobiography” is used as an all-encompassing term for works that might appear to function with a high degree of mimesis or verisimilitude. Such nuances are worthy of particular attention and, in the Western canon, have spawned the creation of subgenres to account for the fragmentation and subsequent reconfiguration of autobiography and the novel into hybrid forms. Yet, by and large, they have not been introduced into the interpretative apparatus of francophone postcolonial literature.

Notwithstanding this gap, there are examples to be drawn from work being done in other “minority,” or minor, literatures. Interest in the writing subject and his or her specificity is demonstrated by the multiplication of studies on autobiographical writing as practiced by individuals belonging to a particular, often historically disenfranchised group (women, blacks, Jews, postcolonial subjects, the working class).46 Many of these critical studies view the act of
writing for the subaltern subject as a means of auto-emancipation from the yoke of domination and as a way of asserting a subjectivity that had long been, often literally, silenced. Not only do these studies bring the writings of previously objectified subjects into the critical crosshairs; they also demonstrate an interest in exploring the constraints and ambiguities of autobiography and the writing subject’s use, and perhaps subversion, of the genre.

Beyond according sustained critical attention to the autobiographical writings of a given group, many of these works also interrogate the categorization of their object of study—seeking at times to create or apply a more nuanced generic classification or to demonstrate the porosity of the boundary between autobiography and fiction. In her study of women’s autobiography in France, Leah D. Hewitt suggests that fiction is intricately and deliberately woven into the project of writing the self: “This cheating [the use of fantasy, disguise, imitation, or fiction in autobiography] is both constitutive and disruptive of the autobiographical project. The element of fiction forcefully challenges the validity of the author’s claims to have faithfully reported on the past. . . . Thus the uneasy relationships between the reality of experience and literature, or between memory and the translation of memory into words, are continually mediated by the detours of fiction.”47 Similarly, other scholars and critics who have problematized autobiography and its relationship to fiction have also attempted to deal with the subversive nature of narratives that hover between fiction and autobiography.48 Studies such as these may share a critical filiation with Paul de Man, who suggested that “the distinction between fiction and autobiography is . . . undecideable.” At the very least, examples like the one above demonstrate that emergence from the “ghetto of autobiography” would necessarily be predicated on the adoption of different interpretative, rather than different writing, practices. In his discussion of Proust, Gérard Genette suggests a paradigm that, despite its lack of concrete precepts, offers a metaphor for reading and interpretation that maintains and even celebrates a certain
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The Ambiguity of “Writing Back”: Subversions on a Theme

Beyond its capacity to destabilize generic categories and, in so doing, to intervene in literary debates that have historically taken place in the West (notably in metropolitan France), the discursive strategy of ambiguity in Memmi’s work is also in dialogue with the particular ideologies of its own cultural matrix. As such, historicizing the experiences of the Maghrebi Jewish community, and specifically that of Tunisian Jews, is essential to understanding the role played by local ideologies in Memmi’s corpus. The region’s long history of successive invasions, coupled with its encounter with the French colonizer, produced a unique set of circumstances for both the indigenous Arab population and the region’s ethnic minorities; the Jewish communities were no exception. As such, the Judeo-Maghrebi experience of subjectivity, and its complex
relationship to representations of the self, must be factored into any discussion of Memmi’s work.

Having existed in North Africa for more than two thousand years, a span of time that witnessed periods of both prosperity and persecution, the Maghrebi Jews hailed the arrival of the French colonizer as the end of isolation and the beginning of a period of modernity and progress, in terms of economy, freedom of religion, civil liberties, and social acceptance. In the years that followed colonization, the hopes of the Jewish community appeared to be well founded. Emancipation from the yoke of Islam, which began with progressive legislation for Algerian Jews and spread quickly to most of the Jewish communities in Morocco and Tunisia, was concretized both politically and culturally. In Tunisia, the French state replaced the local bey (or sultan) as the national authority, substituting, in theory, universal republican values for Islamic law and thus affording the Jews a larger measure of security in the region. While this measure, unlike the Crémieux Decree in Algeria, did not result in systematic offers of citizenship, in 1920 Tunisian Jews were granted the possibility of petitioning for citizenship on a case-by-case basis.

Jewish optimism in the face of French colonization was rooted not only in changes effected on the ground in North Africa but also in a perception of France as having offered their coreligionaries in the hexagon the opportunity to live as full citizens. For the Maghrebi Jews, “France represented liberty, equality, and fraternity, the country whose 1789 revolution emancipated and liberated the Jews, who finally became free and equal to Christians. Beginning in 1830 . . . Jews recognized the positive aspects of the French presence. With barely a shade of remorse they gave themselves over to the new influences and engaged body and soul with the opportunities that opened before them.” Such ideas, and the attendant hope they inspired, were promulgated by the Alliance israélite universelle schools established in Tunisia and Morocco. Created and based in France, with the goal of educating the Jews
of the Diaspora, the AIU viewed the acquisition of French culture as an essential conduit to modernity and as a tool for combating hatred and prejudice. Indeed, the French language education provided by the AIU—beginning at the elementary level—was a key factor in the early emergence of francophone Jewish literature in Tunisia.

The situation, however, was far from a perfect symbiosis, and the zeal with which the Jews embraced French values was not systematically mirrored by French settlers’ acceptance of the Jews in their colonies. Furthermore, when the extension of World War II into North Africa brought the Vichy Laws to the French colonial holdings, Maghrebi Jews—particularly the Jews of Tunisia—were relegated to the status of second-class citizens and subjected to deprivations and humiliations similar to those of their European counterparts.

In light of such historical pressures, the enunciation of a subject position is understandably an endeavor laced with peril. Indeed, within the Judeo-Maghrebi community, individuation has long been held as a threat to the group’s cohesiveness and as undermining its existing vulnerability. As a measure of protection, the self is thus subordinated to society, and in this context it is not surprising that writing, particularly the first-person narrative, might be viewed as an act of treason, one whereby the writer seeks to differentiate himself from his community and at the same time potentially reveal information about himself (and by extension, about the group) to outsiders.

If the risks associated with the expression and representation of the individual subject were felt more acutely by the Jewish community as a result of a long history of persecution, it is nonetheless important to note that the resistance to individuation is a shared aspect of Muslim and Jewish culture alike in the Maghreb. One Arabophone critic cites traditional values as an obstacle to forms such as the novel: “[It] comes from a disgust with introspection, confession, and in general everything that we would call the
'unveiling of the self’ in the Arab-Muslim cultural tradition.” Perhaps as a result of this worldview, first-person narration is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Maghrebi francophone literature; the autodiegetic novel in particular tends to be rare prior to the 1950s. Judeo-Maghrebi writers like Memmi may have been more eager than their Muslim compatriots to embrace the form of the autodiegetic novel, and in so doing, they also embraced its subversive intent. If, as it has been stated, the “exposition of the self” remained distasteful to the traditional community, then the Jewish writers who had recourse to the “I”—in either a novel or an autobiography—would appear to be contesting, or at least questioning, a vision of subjectivity promulgated from within their cultural sphere, whereby “any individual or marginal act can only lead to distrust. Hence the group's constant refusal of anything that could question, divide, or contest in the name of an individual search or an external aspiration: acquisition of a language other than the native tongue, adoption of foreign lifestyles, the lure of marriage with an outsider—or even the betrayal of the oral tradition, keeper of the community, by turning to writing, symbol of individuality par excellence” (my italics). For the early generations of Jewish writers from the Maghreb, consequently, writing was not—or not only—a mimetic process involving the use of forms borrowed from the West such as autobiography or iterations thereof. It was also a bold engagement with the limitations and superstitions of their own cultural traditions. Tunisian Jews experienced more deeply and in a more profound way the draw of the colonizer; already marginalized in their own country, they looked to the values associated with French universalism to provide a new framework for subjectivity. In parallel, however, traditional ontological modes continued to prevail: the individual should not distinguish himself from the group; within the group, markers of particularity must be blunted, rounded off, sanded down. One is reminded of Memmi's mother and her sup-
posed difficulty remembering where each of her children was born or of Memmi's statement that he could not identify his birthday with any certainty. This strategy of ambiguity is a practice of the "Tribe"—one invoked by Memmi as a means of guarding against the evil eye and spirits of all ilk. Rather than give precise information about the time and date of birth, the "Tribe" prefers to allow for large doses of doubt and speculation, a practice that simultaneously underlines the importance of the specificity of the origin and evacuates the possibility of ever establishing it with any certainty.

This ancestral strategy is not unlike Memmi’s competing impulses to fiction and autobiography: seemingly obsessed with the question of origin and willing to reveal just enough to establish the primacy of the concepts of origin and identity, he nevertheless forecloses the possibility of creating a complete, veridical record of the self. By adopting a strategy of ambiguity rooted in that of his ancestral traditions, Memmi leverages the community’s discursive talismans to protect himself, his family, and his extended tribe of characters against the darts of the evil eye—the potential misfortunes associated with easy identification. He does so by using fiction, or storytelling, which plunges the text into an interstitial space regardless of its genre. Pointing to his mother’s penchant for inventing stories, Memmi hints that such techniques are in fact part of a cultural inheritance:

**ALBERT MEMMI.** My mother was an illiterate woman who . . . spoke *her own* language . . . , and who expressed herself through parables in fact. I love making up proverbs—maybe you’ve noticed that I invent them. I invent them because my mother did. Back then I thought that she was simply using stories from the collection—because we have an extraordinary collection of proverbs. . . .

**SALIM JAY** . . . and you verified that she had invented some of them. . . .
ALBERT MEMMI. Well, they didn’t exist anywhere! She had made them all up.⁶⁶

Like his mother, who was less concerned with when and where each of her children was born than with the fact that they were hers, Memmi reveals himself to be less interested in having his texts come into precise alignment under a set of predetermined generic rubrics than in establishing their continuity and their connectivity, not only to each other but to himself and to a broader literary project as well.

This would suggest a “motherist” reading of the origin of writing in Memmi’s works. Literature for Memmi (telling stories, inventing proverbs) is inscribed in his family tree like a factor of genetic predisposition; the illiterate Maïra/Marguerite Sarfati “writes” stories, and so does her son. And yet we see a legacy at work not only in the creation of the material but also in its treatment. Memmi states that his mother is “no liar”; neither is he, and yet in the spirit of Robbe-Grillet, he is no truth teller either. Rather than playing “avec le corps de sa mère” [with his mother’s body], as Barthes has described the writing process, for Memmi the production of literature might be better symbolized as playing with his mother’s corpus.⁶⁷ Autobiography, then, in Memmi’s œuvre, may be understood less as a generic classification applicable to certain works than as an impulse at once present and subverted in all of them.

Throughout Memmi’s writings, a superstitious ancestral strategy emerges as what might be called a postmodern and postcolonial autobiographical impulse that thwarts itself at every turn. This impulse is best represented metaphorically by the game of hide-and-seek or perhaps even the notion of “playing hard to get”—a technique designed to both attract and avoid. Memmi, as we have seen, beckons to the reader while simultaneously holding him or her at bay, and this attitude amounts to something of a game, albeit a tacit one. By remaining deliberately ambiguous with respect to the biographical detail included in his work, Memmi calls for

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the reader’s mediation. In addition to this connivance with the reader, the continual back and forth between fabrication and fact maintains the generic classification of Memmi’s works in a constant state of disequilibrium, on the tipping point between autobiography and fiction. This state of generic indeterminacy harks back to the ambiguity of the origin that is at the center of Memmi’s writing project. Furthermore, by rendering generic classifications problematic, Memmi’s work erects a bulwark against critics who maintain that the “third world writer” works in borrowed forms and continually produces texts that constitute national allegories.68

Beyond its capacity to destabilize certain received ideas about literature from a particular cultural space, and despite its demonstrated rootedness in local traditions, this project of strategic self-referential obfuscation may nonetheless have ramifications on a more global level. In postcolonial theory, “writing back” has become a key catchphrase: the empire (as a trio of Australian critics announced in the title of their eponymous work of criticism) writes back to the center, and “back” may signify “to,” “for,” and “against.”69 The writers of former colonies, in other words, have something to say to the former colonizer. Of course, the zing of “writing back” comes from its rhyming association with the second film of the Star Wars trilogy, The Empire Strikes Back, suggesting a kind of written onslaught enacted by the postcolonial writer and designed to cast down a gauntlet before the former colonizer.70 The concept does not require the formerly colonized writer to attack directly in the form of a diatribe against the former colonizer; rather, the strike may be read in the very act of taking up, and then subverting, a language (and other cultural practices) imposed through imperialism.

In some readily apparent ways, Memmi’s writing can easily be seen as engaging the former colonizer, that is, as “writing back” to, for, and against the hexagon and its colonial discourses. His strategies of narration undermine the discourse and psychology of depersonalization and homogenization generated by colonial society,
a set of phenomena he collectively dubs “the mark of the plural”: “Another sign of the colonized’s depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (‘They are this.’ ‘They are all the same.’). . . . It is not just a grammatical expression. [The colonizer] refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in the colonized’s life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and [the colonized] does not exist as an individual” (my italics).71 In thwarting “the mark of the plural,” Memmi certainly writes back—in the sense of against—totalizing modes of imagining the colonized. However, in the polysemia of “writing back” lies the notion that the proverbial center functions as the sole narratee of the postcolonial text, the interlocutor with which the postcolonial writer perforce must engage. In other words, the concept of “writing back” contains within it the tacit assumption that the cultural objects produced by the formerly colonized are ostensibly destined for the ears and eyes of the former colonizer.

While a writer like Memmi may indeed be writing back to and challenging the center, it is clear that he is also writing back to his own origins and challenging the subjective model of the periphery—of his particular periphery. By writing “I,” by revealing information about his community, by creating narrators who might or might not be iterations of himself, by writing certain elements of his own story into his essays, and by performing a variety of selves in his interviews, Memmi’s actions fly in the face of the Judeo-Tunisian community’s desire to place the collective before the individual. In other words, what we discover by reading the ambiguity of Memmi’s oeuvre rather than ignoring it, and by interrogating the autobiographical rather than accepting it at face value, is that the postcolonial narrative has more than one interlocutor, and that while the Empire may indeed be writing back, we cannot be sure to whom.
Writing without Seeing

The Enigmas of Memmi’s “Denigration of Vision”

I write without seeing.

Denis Diderot, “Lettre à Sophie Volland du 10 juin 1759” (1930)

What happens when one writes without seeing?


The prison-house is the world of sight.

Plato, The Republic

I’ll let you count all the words through which it is suggested that, to speak truly, one must think according to the measure of the eye.

Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation (1993)

From the blind sage Uncle Makhlouf and the myopic adolescent Alexandre Mordekhaï Benillouche to Marcel, ophthalmologist and narrator of The Scorpion, who despite his chosen profession is unable to save his brother’s failing sight, the heroes of Memmi’s novels are haunted by eyes and the possibility of their failure. Memmi’s personal essays also reveal an anxious rehearsal of the state of his own vision: in Le nomade immobile, he announces on the very first page that despite various advances in technology, nothing can be done for his “failing eyes,” which now prevent him from practicing his favorite hobbies. At the beginning of a chapter titled “Nous sommes tous dépendants” [We are all dependent], Memmi explains: “I suffered a retinal detachment, strangely heralded by
premonitory dreams for which I still have no explanation, despite the help of doctors. During a stay in Argentina a series of flashes caused a definitive lesion in my right eye. In addition to permanent discomfort . . . I am haunted by worries about the health of my other eye.” 2 Finally, in a radio interview, Memmi links the incidence of ocular disorders in Tunisia to the country’s climate, calling the sun there “blinding” and noting that Tunisia has “the greatest percentage of eye disease.” 3 For Memmi, it would seem that poor eyesight is, among other things, an endemic Tunisian characteristic, a national signifier of sorts.

Because it occurs with some persistence in Memmi’s nonfiction, it is tempting to read the trope of blindness in Memmi’s novels through a biographical filter. Writing about the pervasiveness of all things ocular in *The Scorpion*, Jacqueline Arnaud notes that Memmi “turns into a symbol that which is, for him—nearsighted and suffering from a retinal detachment just after the publication of [*The Scorpion*]—a personal obsession nourished with observation and exact information.” 4 Without denying a degree of biographical referentiality, Tunisian scholar Afifa Marzouki nonetheless brings greater nuance to her interpretation of the repeated tropes of blindness in Memmi’s work: “In Memmi’s insistence [on eyes and eye disease] one can see a certain penchant for realistic detail, perhaps even an autobiographical reference, but also an interest in seeing, in seeing clearly, that is to say, in understanding. While the fear of physical blindness is indeed present, the anguish of spiritual blindness is even more fundamental . . . Seeing well, in Memmi’s oeuvre, is in fact having the highest degree possible of self-awareness. The gaze is therefore basically introspective.” 5 Marzouki’s reading is helpful insofar as it attempts to move beyond a literal interpretation of the representation of blindness as a purely physical infirmity. Rather than a fact underscored and reflected by the author’s own medical history, here the fear of physical blindness symbolizes a fear of metaphysical blindness, or a lack of insight. One is reminded of Oedipus, whose capacity for insight
could only flourish once the possibility of physical vision had been permanently removed.

The gaze, however, is not only introspective. Notwithstanding its continual return to the trope of blindness, Memmi’s work (both fiction and nonfiction) is also marked by references to, or the presence of, elements belonging to the broader domain of vision and the visual. It is clear that blindness and visuality are linked; on a narrative level, Memmi’s blind characters or those with poor eye-sight are juxtaposed with the figure of an ophthalmologist, or with figures who suffer from a surplus of vision—those who, like Tiresias, saw or knew too much. Nonetheless, the presence of the visual extends beyond diegetic and tropological concerns to include the manner in which the texts themselves may be apprehended as visual objects. In *The Scorpion*, for example, five different typefaces are used to represent the different storylines, thus endowing the novel’s polyphonic presentation with a legend that can be apprehended visually. At the same time, in both *The Scorpion* and *Le Désert*, the inherently visual nature of text is highlighted (and at times, undermined) by the presence of intercalated images that combine to form an iconotextual structure.6

Within Memmi’s corpus, this heretofore unexplored coexistence of elements that would suggest both a faith in, and a profound mistrust of, all things ocular, is significantly more suggestive and problematic in light of contemporaneous intellectual discourses relative to what Jay terms the “denigration of vision” in twentieth-century French thought.7 Unlike Derrida or Levinas, to name just two of the philosophers associated with this discursive formation, Memmi has not explicitly theorized the visual; however, even in the absence of an articulated program of engagement with topics such as the gaze or the hegemony of the eye, Memmi’s novels and essays—particularly when read contrapuntally—nonetheless produce an implicit discourse that interacts productively with contemporary theories of vision and the visual realm. Although articulated in both complimentary and contradictory terms, at times
within the space of a single text, the ambivalence of this implicit discourse on vision—at once “ocularphilic” and “ocularphobic”—suggests further links between Memmi’s thought and that of his contemporaries. Few postcolonial works have been read through this prism, yet Memmi’s oeuvre is of particular relevance not only in light of his relationship to French literature and metropolitan literary circles but also because traditional Jewish iconoclasm may play a role in the construction, deconstruction, and representation of the visual in his corpus.

A Brief History of Blindness, Writing, and Alterity

Any text’s allusions to or obsession with the visual draws on a deep well of historical and literary references. The story of the eye—its properties, powers, and limits—has at times been articulated according to diametrically opposed poles. Whereas Martin Jay argues that Hellenic society fetishized sight, as evidenced by its love of spectacle (particularly in the form of theater), its idealization of the nude body, and its emphasis on attainment of knowledge through visual contemplation, Ella Shohat reminds us that the Hebraic tradition’s interdiction of figural representation as articulated in the second commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,” constituted something of a “righteous rage against the fetish of the image.” This binary discourse of vision, however, does not hold over time and in all circumstances. Although the Hellenic privileging of sight over the other senses came to inform Western civilization’s attitude toward the visual (particularly in France from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), by the end of the nineteenth century this attitude had shifted from one of ocularcentrism to one of ocularphobia. And while Judaic iconoclasm is rooted in the Ten Commandments, contemporary exegesis suggests that an aporia was inscribed within the scripture from the beginning: “Deuteronomy’s verbal mediation in the expression of the taboo on visual representation [the Second Commandment] paradoxically elicits in the reader’s mind the very image of what
is prohibited. . . . That passage that stipulates the interdiction of visual image contains its own violation. The description elicits mental moving images of, for example, flying birds and swimming fish, while at the same time asking the reader to negate the very visuality elicited.”

Thus it would seem that the convenient opposition of Hellenic ocularphilia to Hebraic ocularphobia is useful only as a starting point, as both traditions shift and hesitate along a continuum of approaches between the two extremes, overlapping on occasion. There are, nevertheless, on either side of this (false) dichotomy, two moments in the history of the discourse on the ocular that are of particular interest to this study: the Enlightenment fascination with the blind and vision, and postmodern antiocularcentrism.

In Birth of the Clinic, Michel Foucault noted that the two “great mythical experiences on which the philosophy of the eighteenth century had wished to base its beginning [were] the foreign spectator in an unknown country, and the man born blind restored to light.”

During the Enlightenment, the advent of new surgical techniques making the restoration of sight possible piqued an interest in the blind as objects of scientific and philosophical inquiry. Typified by the “Molyneux problem,” fascination with the blind man returned to sight posed questions of perception, knowledge, and language, and signaled a change in the perception of blind subjectivity. As William Paulson points out in his study on the representation of blindness in French literature, “with the Enlightenment, with surgical cures and philosophical speculation, the difference of the blind is no longer situated in a distant and untouchable beyond; it becomes natural, accessible to science, and subject to rational remedies.”

Initially conceived as radically other, the blind man, through his return to vision—a “becoming natural”—sheds his difference. The desire for this transformation from blind to sighted, however, may be interpreted as a rejection of alterity or the imposition of a broadly construed idea of “normal.” Paulson continues: the blind man “cured by the surgeon’s knife and
brought forcibly to the visible world would be a stranger in a famil-
lar land, capable of perceiving with virgin eyes all that the inhabit-
ants had failed to notice."\textsuperscript{15} The experience of blindness thus results
in a greater capacity for insight.\textsuperscript{16} What the blind man returned to
sight has in common with figures such as Montesquieu’s Persians,
Voltaire’s \textit{ingénue}, or Mme de Graffigny’s Peruvian woman (all three
emblematic of Foucault’s foreign spectators in an unknown land)
is not only the novelty of first sight; their ability to see with “virgin
eyes” suggests that by providing insight into the “foreign lands” in
which they arrive, both the blind man and the outsider possess the
capacity to transcend the experience of alterity.\textsuperscript{17}

The relationship between vision and alterity is also central to
postmodernism, which Jay refers to as “the culminating chapter
in a story of the (enucleated) eye.”\textsuperscript{18} The critique of ocularcentrism
with respect to alterity can be observed, for example, in readings
of Derrida and Levinas in which vision is associated with “an im-
position of sameness on the other, and thus as violent in terms of
the philosophy of difference.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, for these and other phi-
losophers of the late twentieth century, vision is tantamount to
hegemony and therefore to be resisted.\textsuperscript{20} In spite of this resistance
and notwithstanding Jay’s tracing of the “denigration of vision”—
which seems to follow a steady trajectory toward the closing of
the eye—many critics of ocularcentrist discourse in fact present
a more nuanced and less categorical interpretation of vision.\textsuperscript{21}

Derrida’s \textit{Echographies of Television}, for example, suggests that
vision can promote ethical reflection and action: describing the
television coverage of a notorious episode of police brutality in the
United States, he notes that “no one could look the other way, away
from what had, as it were, been put right before his eyes and even
forced into his consciousness or onto his conscience.”\textsuperscript{22} That see-
ing the violence visited upon an individual translates into an ethi-
ical response in the viewer suggests a constructive role for vision,
which in turn calls into question the discourse of antiocularcen-
trism. Foucault, also skeptical of vision and wary of its capacity to

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exercise power, nonetheless devised tools for resistance that took their cue from the nature of optical domination: responding to “panoptical” regimes of disciplinary power, he “evolved an appropriately ‘optical’ politics of resistance and reform: a deconstructive politics of strategic positions.” Like Derrida and Foucault, Levi-
nas also condemns vision for its hegemony—“Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them”—while at the same time considering, alongside an ethics of blindness, the existence of an ethics of seeing.

While it is important to note the nuances in the positions held by a number of twentieth-century thinkers, a blind spot remains in postmodernist antiocularcentric discourse. What the various arguments against the visual appear to neglect, particularly with regard to literary production—that is, to objects created for a reader, a person who will turn her gaze upon them—is the dependence of literature upon the visual realm. The acts of reading and writing are ostensibly linked to sight, as is aptly demonstrated by Diderot’s decision, recounted in Letter on the Blind (1749), not to ask the Puiseaux blind man about literature: “No one thought of asking him questions as to painting and writing. . . . We only talked to him about those kinds of glasses which exhibit objects in relief.”

Possessing no relief or texture perceptible to touch, literature thus falls outside the ken of the blind man. However, in their descriptions of vision as superfluous to the writing process, both Derrida and Memmi tacitly contest the notion that sight is a prerequisite for literature, suggesting, on the contrary, that blindness is nearly a condition sine qua non for textual production. For Derrida, the process is analogous to the child’s game of blind man’s bluff:

Everything I do, especially when I am writing, resembles a game of blindman’s bluff: the one who is writing, always by hand, even when using machines, holds out his hand like a blind man seeking to touch the one whom he could thank for the gift of a language, for the very words in which he declares
himself ready to give thanks. And to beg for mercy as well. While the other, more prudent, hand, another blind man’s hand, tries to protect against the fall, against a headlong premature fall, in a word, against haste. I have been saying for a long time now that one writes manuscripts for two hands. And I digitalize like a madman.28

Derrida’s likening of the writing process to blind man’s bluff translates the temporary, perhaps even self-imposed nature of the blindness in question; the ludic atmosphere of the game, however, is absent. Memmi, on the other hand, draws a parallel to a different kind of blindness: not that of the child’s game, but that of the mole—an animal born blind. He notes that the first draft of a text can be written anywhere: once the raw material has been furnished, he can turn his attention to the task of editing, a more demanding process requiring particular circumstances: “The first draft can be done anywhere. . . . It is only afterwards, with the drapes drawn and the lamp on, even if it’s light outside, that I start to dig. . . . Like a mole, I dig, I dig deep within myself, constantly bringing up material that I immediately set down on bits of paper.”29 Similar to Memmi, and to Derrida “digitalizing like crazy,” the characters of Memmi’s oeuvre grasp about in darkness both real and metaphorical, reading the world with their hands, seeking to write themselves out of the obscurity that prevents them from seeing (themselves) clearly. It is thus worth considering more closely the complex ways in which motifs of blindness, the visual, and the interrogation of the act of writing function together within Memmi’s texts and ultimately form a nuanced critique of vision that refuses to side with either ocularcentrism or ocularphobia.

**Blind Man Bluffed: Writing Blindness in The Pillar of Salt**

Questions of vision and blindness are inscribed in Pillar from its incipit, both by virtue of the title’s biblical intertextuality and the epigram from the book of Genesis: “But Lot’s wife looked
back, and she was turned into a pillar of salt” (19:26). Like Tiresias, blinded for having observed Athena in her bath, Lot’s wife is punished both for her disobedience—for having gazed upon the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah despite the divine interdiction to the contrary—and, by extension, for the surfeit of vision that resulted from her defiance. This same chapter of Genesis also contains a specific reference to blindness, which occurs just prior to the transformation of Lot’s wife: upon saving Lot from a crowd of townspeople determined to enter his home, the angels “struck the men at the entrance of the house, one and all, with such a blinding light that they were utterly unable to reach the doorway” (19:11). Blindness in this instance is not only debilitating for the evildoers and a punishment for their crimes; the same light that blinds the townspeople permits Lot to see—both literally and figuratively—the true nature of the angels, disguised as they had been as ordinary travelers. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah thus contains three variations on the themes of sight and blindness, all of which indicate a certain mistrust of mortal, physical vision. In the case of the townspeople, the suppression of their vision inhibits their ability to do wrong, which in turn suggests a relationship of cause and effect between vision and evil. And although the same divine light that blinded the townspeople provided Lot with illumination, his insight was nonetheless divinely ordained. Finally, although not literally blinded, Lot’s wife had her eyes permanently closed as a result of her egregious gaze, of her looking back.

“Looking back” is a useful and pertinent metaphor for an examination of vision and blindness in The Pillar of Salt, as the novel’s analeptic structure stages its protagonist, Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, in the process of “looking back” over his adolescence in colonial Tunisia. The years in question—which included the experience of anti-Semitism, the indignities of colonization, the frustration of being a “ghetto Jew” at a high school frequented by children of the Jewish bourgeoisie, and the drama of the Second World War as both the conflict itself and Nazi racial laws extend-
ed into the French protectorates of North Africa—are framed by twin episodes that bookend the novel, both of which are titled “L’épreuve.” It is during the first épreuve—as Benillouche sits for the written portion of the agrégation—that he decides to “waste the time allotted for an exam” by writing the story of his life. A recognition of his own blindness is at the root of this task: “How blind I was to what I really am, how naïve it was of me to hope to overcome the fundamental rift in me, the contradiction that is the very basis of my life!”

As a young man coming of age during the era of the French protectorate in Tunisia, Benillouche’s experience of alienation is in part the result of his indigenous status and the subjugation of that population to the occupying power. The “fundamental rift” within him, however, is layered with additional complexities, for Benillouche is a product of La Hara, the Jewish ghetto of Tunis, the son of an uneducated mother and an artisan father. In a predominantly Arab country, Benillouche’s Judaism alone would have been enough to situate him on the periphery of society, but the socioeconomic status of his family pushes him even further to the margins, placing him in a position of inferiority with respect to the integrated, bourgeois, French-educated Jewish families of Tunis. As the eldest son of a poor family, Benillouche would normally have been destined for an apprenticeship as a saddle maker rather than advanced study; however, his early scholastic success was noticed by benefactors in the Jewish community, who sponsored scholarships for him to attend high school. Benillouche thus crosses the frontier separating the Jewish ghetto from the Jewish bourgeoisie and finds himself faced with young Jews “from a background so different from mine that they were as foreign to me as the others.”

The narrator recounts this particular aspect of his life in a chapter titled “L’Escalier” [The Stairwell], in which he is invited to a party at the house of Michel, a wealthy Jewish classmate belonging to the “foreign” milieu. Part social gathering, part Scout meeting,
the party is intended as a welcome for the national commissioner of Scouts, and Benillouche has been asked to join in as the director of the “Jewish educational program.” In spite of his disdain for their social sphere, he secretly hopes to find his place among them: “I was all the more anxious to approach them because they refuse to consider me as one of their crowd.”36 In the following passage, cited in extenso, Benillouche arrives at the apartment building of his classmate only to find himself plunged into literal, and metaphorical, darkness:

When I reached my destination, I found the downstairs lobby in our host’s house completely dark. I fumbled a while along the walls, trying to find the light switch, but soon had to give up. So I went ahead in the darkness, hoping to be able to guide myself by the streaks of light that appeared beneath the doors or the light of the glass roof above the stairwell. But the passage soon followed a bend and I then found myself in absolutely unmitigated darkness, as if I had closed my eyes. I was shortsighted by nature and had developed a kind of carelessness about looking, often trusting to my sense of touch. So I now tried to find the wall, then clung to it with one hand, and began to go ahead, for a while, hesitant and full of misgivings, until my hand felt a curve. I followed it and finally reached what I supposed to be a stair rail: I was saved! One step at a time, I then began to climb, being careful to feel my way at the end of each step with the tip of my toes, as a precaution. . . . I then guessed I had reached the first floor, but Michael lived on the second, so I followed the stair rail, without letting go of it, all the way round the landing until my foot bumped against a step, the first one of the second flight of stairs, after which I began to go up. I was still in total darkness, as if I were buried in the heart of something solid and opaque. Nowhere did my eyes detect any light that could guide me at all. Again, I was able to con-
clude, from the way my foot had fallen a second time without having met a step, that I had reached another landing, the second floor. The stair rail was really an excellent guide in my ascension, though no longer of much use to me. I figured out that I should try to reach the wall opposite the stair rail and follow it, which would inevitably lead me to a door. So I regained some of my assurance. . . . How odd that there should not yet be any doors! I began to feel annoyed by this business of creeping around in the silent darkness. I must have already spent a full quarter of an hour of my young life in this hole! Perhaps I exaggerated the time this adventure had lasted, but I had climbed up the stairs at a snail's pace and was now moving along a passage that seemed to have no end. Where was I? . . . At long last, my hand felt the framework of a door. I knocked, without hesitating; if it was the wrong door, I would apologize, but there came no reply, there was nobody there. A really stupid anger came over me: what on earth was I up to in this place . . . My eyes and ears seemed to have become useless, and I was reduced now to my sense of feeling. . . . Nothing, only emptiness and darkness. So here I now was, adrift and with nothing to anchor me anywhere, an invisible man in an invisible world, reduced to mere thought. Suddenly, I was scared, with a regression toward all my childhood panics. I realized all at once that I happened to be some thirty feet above the ground, and that one more step might be enough to plunge me headlong down the stairs. I no longer dared go forward or retreat, terrified of my own excessive freedom as a prisoner of sheer void. The floor, beneath my feet, acquired an unbelievable importance as the only fixed point of which I was aware. In my state of frustration and defeat, I wanted to feel assured of at least this foundation beneath me; so I folded my overcoat in four, placed it on the floor, and sat on it, calmly waiting for another guest to come to my rescue.
Although clearly not a description of an actual loss of physical sight, the passage nevertheless deploys a vocabulary of blindness. This lexicon is evidenced by multiple references to the darkness in which Benillouche must navigate “as if I had closed my eyes,” and this is further reinforced by an insistence on the tactile. Left to grope about, the narrator uses his hand to guide himself along the wall and his feet to predict the rise of the next step.

The image of the outstretched hand recalls Derrida’s description of drawings of the blind in which the hand “ventures forth, it precipitates, rushes ahead, certainly, but this time in place of the head, as if to precede, prepare, protect it. A safeguard, a guardrail.” The theme of the fall also resonates within both texts, as Derrida describes the hand not just as a tool for “reading” his environs but as a means of guarding against “precipitation”: “Anticipation guards against precipitation. . . . Standing on his own two feet, a blind man explores his world by feeling out an area that he must recognize without yet cognizing it.” Benillouche, invoking a similar notion, recalls his childhood phobia come back to haunt him: “one more step might be enough to plunge me headlong down the stairs.” Furthermore, in insisting upon the importance of the hand, both authors underscore the role of the tactile: from the beginning of the episode Benillouche must grope for the light (fumbling); for Derrida, the blind man explores his world “by feeling out.” Benillouche is indeed reduced to his sense of touch; his salvation is dependent on the ability of his hands to read and interpret his world. Accustomed to reading familiar—we might even say familial—surroundings and contexts (“I was shortsighted by nature, often trusting to my sense of touch”), his hands encounter the hallway as a blind man scans a page of Braille. Yet when Benillouche’s hands are unable to decode the “text” and he fails to seize that which might save him, the stakes are revealed to be no less than vital: he falls into a state of paralysis, daring to move neither forward nor back, not unlike the pillar of salt, the sign under which the novel is inscribed.
Indeed, Benillouche’s experience of petrification—understood figuratively as a synonym for paralysis resulting from fear and literally as a process by which the organic becomes mineral, and thus fixed, static—recalls the story of Lot’s wife. However, unlike the biblical figure, at the end of his ordeal in the stairwell the protagonist of *Pillar* has his vision restored: “There was suddenly light, unexpectedly brilliant, re-creating the whole universe around me. . . . I entered Michel’s apartment, as disturbed as if I had been visited by signs and portents.” Parsing the metaphors of the child’s game of blind man’s bluff—to which Benillouche’s predicament bears at least a passing resemblance—one scholar notes that the experience of temporary blindness imposed in the course of the game eventually leads to better sight (comprehension): “when vision is restored, knowledge is solidified by the application and combination of all the faculties. External sight is coupled with internal insight to arrive at the highest level of understanding.”

Paradoxically, then, the experience of sightlessness renders the experience of vision more powerful, as the return to sight is accompanied by a supplement of knowledge.

What supplement, then, accompanies Benillouche as he regains his vision and crosses the threshold into what might be described as a foreign land? Indeed, what he has gleaned remains unclear to him: he is “troubled” by a knowledge that has yet to be revealed and that manifests only as a sign to be decoded and interpreted. The inaccessibility of this new knowledge would seem to suggest a failure of the experience of physical blindness to effect a change in Benillouche’s capacity for insight. Whereas the eighteenth-century blind man returned to sight was said to emerge from darkness capable of transcending his previous alterity, it is unclear what effect the experience of blindness has had on the narrator of *Pillar*. The episode of “The Stairwell” is thus a *mise-en-abîme* of Benillouche’s existential crisis, in which petrification brought on by blindness serves as a metaphor for the dual impossibilities of assimilation and escape: trapped for a moment in time, Benillouche can nei-
ther go forward (join the others) nor go back (return to his own). The questions that haunt him during the dark moments in the stairwell are the result of his sensation of wearing a permanent blindfold, one that prevents him—regardless of his mastery of the French language and fluency in the subtleties of the “dominant” culture—from escaping the state of darkness where his senses and intuitions cannot be trusted and where he is constantly marked as “different” from those who surround him.

It would seem, then, that the stairway, rather than symbolizing transcendence (as an ascending stairway might), solidifies its impossibility. Esther Bénain-Ouaknine and Robert Elbaz, writing about blindness in Memmi’s novels from a Bachelardian perspective, suggest a link between sightlessness and the repetition of themes of exiguity, obscurity, barriers, and spatial obstruction, the principal figures of which would be the cul-de-sac (the impasse where Benillouche was born), the single darkened bedroom he shared with his sister and his parents, or the stairwell. The authors hold that the repeated representation of narrow, dead-end spaces is constitutive of the author’s—and by extension, his characters’—worldview. It is possible, nevertheless, to move beyond Bénain-Ouaknine and Elbaz’s reading of blindness and exiguity as the representation of “a man experiencing the narrowing of space” toward a reading that opens more avenues for interpretation. Rather than tending toward exiguity, Benillouche’s world is revealed, at the end of the novel, to be on the verge of the widest possible expansion.

Insofar as blindness may correspond to, or be evocative of, a particular type of space, the stairwell in Pillar can be convincingly read as a form of heterotopia. What Foucault described in 1967 as juxtaposing “in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,” Memmi generates in the early 1950s via literary discourse. Trapped in the stairwell, Benillouche is caught in a double-bind, in a passage that brings together the public (the outside) and the private (the inside); however,
because it is neither one nor the other, it is in essence nowhere, a place “outside of all places.” Furthermore, the stairwell brings together two incompatible spheres: the socially and politically opposed contexts of Benillouche’s world of poverty and disenfranchisement, on the one hand, and the Scouts’ world of bourgeois assimilation, on the other.

The use made of a particular space during a moment in time is integral to its designation as heterotopic, and therefore a given space may function as a heterotopia at some moments but not at others. Through his use or experience of the stairwell—his prolonged groping in the darkness and his existential interrogation (Where was I? What was I doing here? I was reduced to touch)—Benillouche turns this particular space into a heterotopia of “crisis” or “deviation.” While the stairwell clearly does not function in the same manner as a hospital or prison—Foucault’s examples of classic crisis or deviation heterotopias—it is nonetheless a site in which a crisis occurs. Because Benillouche’s alienation is in part a result of colonization (in addition to being a problem of social integration), it is tempting to edge the stairwell one step closer toward the status of a heterotopia by gesturing toward Foucault’s proposition that the colony is also a form of heterotopia, insofar as colonies create heterotopias of compensation—“another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” On one hand, the colony, once established as such, can no longer be the place it once was, as it will forever bear the mark of the imperial culture; on the other hand, despite passing resemblances to, or signs of, the metropolis, the colony can never become the same as the imperial space proper. Benillouche’s existence as a colonized subject allows us to draw a parallel between the stairwell and the colony; in this manner, it is possible to conceive of the episode in the stairwell as a microcosm of the process of colonization.

Marked as it is by blindness, the space of the stairwell is also a space of silence, a notion that further links the stairway episode to
the game of blind man’s bluff. The rules of the game require that the blindfolded player be deprived of sight, not that he become deaf and mute. Aural perception, in addition to touch, is in fact the blind man’s greatest asset; Benillouche, however, notes that not only his eyes but also his ears have become “useless.” His own muteness also contributes to the silence: Benillouche could call out, if he so desired, without transgressing the rules, for the blind man’s muteness is not a prerequisite for a fair game. Why then does he refuse to speak? Silence, in fact, is the tactic of choice for the “sighted” players who observe as the blind man bumbles and gropes: when he comes too close, they dodge his grasp to avoid being tagged and identified, and if he calls out, his cry echoes in a void. In the case of blind man’s bluff, communication is a one-way street: there is a unique/single sense (un sens unique) that runs from the individual whose being in the world is (temporarily) hampered to the others. If communication were to flow in the opposite direction, from the others to the blinded individual, the rules of the game would be violated and the game itself compromised, voided of its internal purpose and meaning. This sens unique, or single meaning, is perhaps even more fully apprehended by the use of its French synonym—of a somewhat more relaxed linguistic register—sens interdit: forbidden direction or, more loosely rendered, forbidden sense/meaning. The blind man is in effect engaged in a space of forbidden meaning; no sign he produces will be validated by his potential interlocutors, for as soon as dialogue is established with the other participants, meaning is created and the game is up.

The phenomenon described here is very close to Roman Jakobson’s definition of communication in his theory of the speech event. In linguistic terms, speech is conceived as a “bilateral act” that does not exist in a vacuum: “Parole is attributable to the reciprocity between the addressee and addressee. . . . Speech must reach its goal; as we have already pointed out, the speech act is a bilateral act, and the receptive side is an indispensable part of
it." Yet Benillouche is acutely aware that calling out would mean deploying words in a void, further evinced when the first door he locates reveals itself to be a dead-end, a hollow echo chamber, from which the only sound to emerge is a deafening silence. The physical channel and psychological connections running from Benillouche to the others, essential for communication to occur, are absent. Whereas in the true game of blind man’s bluff, the establishment of communication is tantamount to an infraction of the rules and therefore signals the end of the round, for Benillouche, communication with others does not signal the end of any game (and a return to “normal” society), but instead is foreclosed from the start.

Silence, however, is also the place from within which writing can begin. As Derrida and Memmi have both suggested, a particular type of sensory deprivation is concomitant with writing; both describe blindness as the state of being for textual production, whether “a game of blind man’s bluff” or a transformation into “a digging mole.” Their contemporary, Blanchot, draws a similar parallel between writing and silence: “Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to silence if one wants, at last, to be heard.” It is worth noting that in addition to its explicit references to silence, Blanchot’s passage is inhabited by a rhetoric of blindness and vision, thus linking the ear to the eye. The point where “nothing reveals itself,” the essential condition in which writing begins, may well be read as a representation of blindness, for when “nothing reveals itself,” nothing can be seen; vision itself is futile. The “heart of dissimulation,” furthermore, is the ultimate hiding place, where all things related to speech (speaking, language, murmurs) are visual, yet remain simulacra—shadows, images. Pertinent here, then, is Blanchot’s
declaration: “Speaking is not seeing. Speaking frees thought from the optical imperative.”

If silence and blindness are the places from which writing begins, it seems fruitful to return to the moment when Benillouche begins to write, to look back. It is critical to remember that the episode in the stairwell is in fact a literary construct produced by Benillouche himself as he gazes back over his life during the épreuve. In Pillar, the first section titled “L’épreuve” is literally the place where writing begins, and the title refers specifically to the agrégation de philosophie, for which Benillouche sits in Algiers after his studies are interrupted by the war. The short chapter appears to function as a preface, and it is set apart from the body of the text by its italicized print. The épreuve in question is a test in the most concrete and literal sense; it is the moment when students must prove their knowledge of the field of philosophy. Immediately upon reading the exam question, however, Benillouche is struck by his own unwillingness to continue participating in this trial: “How was I ever able to be interested in these games that now seem so absurdly futile? Today we are asked the following: ‘Analyze the influence of Condillac on John Stuart Mill.’”

Inasmuch as it is germane to the discussion regarding blindness and vision (and particularly the eighteenth century’s predilection for such questions), it is worth pausing to consider the intertextuality of such a question. Nearly blind himself by the end of his life, Condillac, an eighteenth-century French philosopher, devoted a great deal of his energies to considering and writing about the Molynexus problem. His conception of blindness would change over time, evolving from a notion of blindness as “pure negativity, perpetual absence” to sight as one sense among several that combine to produce perception. Condillac would also highlight the difference between the verbs voir and regarder—to see and to look (in order to know what one is seeing)—thus distinguishing between types of sight. And while Mill was not interested in questions of blindness per se, the function of perception was crucial to his
work. In his *System of Logic*, he points out the inconstancy of the eye as an organ for discerning truth: “Yet it has long been ascertained, that what is perceived by the eye, is at most nothing more than a variously colored surface.”

Benillouche, however, looks away from Condillac and Mill, that is, away from rational explanation, and as he looks backward he sees the *épreuve* (hardship, burden; a test in the moral sense) that he has lived through. Rather than reflect on the elements of Condillac in John Stuart Mill’s philosophy, Benillouche chooses to write his life, and in the seven-hour space of the *épreuve*, he will put his life to the test:

To give myself countenance, to escape, I continued writing for seven hours, like all the others. I even made the most of the extra fifteen minutes of grace granted to the stragglers. That is because my whole life was rising up in my throat again, because I was writing without thinking, straight from the heart to the pen. At the close of this exhausting session, I had some fifty pages to carry away with me. Perhaps, as I now straighten out this narrative, I can manage to see more clearly into my own darkness and to find a way out.

Unlike the “stragglers” who at the end of the session will submit their texts to the judgment of the experts, Benillouche violates the rules of engagement by taking his text with him and refusing to submit it to a judgment—a gaze—other than his own. The life story he has written has become an object for his own regard, a text to be edited; as such, it calls upon the polysemy of the term *épreuve*, linking Benillouche’s text (and the experience, or trial, that produced it) to *les épreuves*, the proofs of a book destined to be verified and revised by its author prior to publication. Distinctly linked to literature and its production, then, *les épreuves* are also a last stage—an ultimate opportunity for correction—prior to the creation and dissemination of a final product.
If in the first section titled “L’épreuve” Benillouche announces his intention to look back over his life, in the second “L’épreuve”—the penultimate chapter—he gazes back over the result, a set of épreuves (understood here as “proofs”) he has established and that begin with his preparation for the exam he will never take: “I have now come to the point where I began my narrative.”56 While the action does indeed return to the site of the test, the second épreuve is distinct from the preface in that it is incorporated into the chapters of the table of contents (it is neither a postface nor an epilogue). Furthermore, it is not the final episode of the novel (the very last chapter is titled “Departure”), and unlike the first épreuve—printed in italics—the second mixes typography, presenting a mélange of italics and standard text and suggesting the coexistence of two separate narrative strands, one descriptive and one interpretative.57

It is in the final chapter, “Departure,” that Benillouche reads his own text: “At last nothing shields me from myself, . . . I am dying through having turned back to look at my own self. It is forbidden to see oneself, and I have reached the end of discovering myself. God turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt—is it possible for me to survive my contemplation of myself?”58 Struck and overwhelmed by a surfeit of vision, Benillouche reads his life as analogous to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—a kind of primal scene upon which he was not intended to gaze. Having acquired self-knowledge by violating an interdiction to see one’s self, Benillouche compares his predicament to that of the petrified wife of Lot, rendered immobile for having seen too much. Yet Benillouche does not die; unlike the circumstances that befell Lot’s wife, his petrification is figurative, not literal. Looking back, however, has indeed transformed him; while the experience of blindness in the stairwell appears not to have changed his vision, writing the experience of blindness produces a revolution in his gaze. At the end of “Departure”—the beginning, in fact, of his journey to Argentina—Benillouche looks back for the final time: “I lost sight
of the coastline as night descended on the ship.” Losing sight of the coast produces a final rupture of vision. Looking back but at the same time stepping out of stasis, moving forward, Benillouche uses his gaze to challenge the fatality of the backward glance.

Notably, an episode from the final portion of The Scorpion, Memmi’s third novel, also stages a scene on a boat. A fragment titled “L’œil rouge” [Red-Eye] tells the story of Belalouna—a sailor whose vision is sacrificed for the greater good: “From time to time . . . a boat may come within sight of cliffs of rock salt. The way the light glances off them is so dangerous for the eyes that as soon as the man at the wheel calls out that he has seen the prodigious fiery facets, multiplied by the sun and the water, the entire crew rushes down into the hold. But to prevent the boat from drifting rudderless and going down with all hands aboard, one sailor must remain on deck, and go blind in the process.” Belalouna is that very seaman who, having gazed on the dazzling sight offered by the play of light over the crystalline surfaces of the salt rocks, has had his eyes forever closed. The sailor does not regret his sacrifice, however, for the beauty of his final vision is superlative to that of the quotidian, and his mind is freed for imaginary journeys.

This episode can be read in several ways, including as a version of the myth of Ulysses and the sirens, but its relationship to Pillar is perhaps the most pertinent to this study. Jacqueline Arnaud has called “Red-Eye” an inverted “metaphor of The Pillar of Salt.” Whereas Alexandre Mordekhaï Benillouche’s metaphorical blindness is a result of gazing back on the disturbing scenes of his life, Belalouna’s literal blindness is the consequence of seeing a dangerous beauty. It is worth noting, however, that Belalouna’s blinding and Benillouche’s renunciation of the backward gaze both occur aboard a boat at sea, and like the colony, the boat is another Foucauldian heterotopia: “The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack . . . it goes as far as the colonies
in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens.\textsuperscript{63} Hence the return of the heterotopia at the end of \textit{Pillar} and its reappearance in \textit{The Scorpion} permit the linking of boat, colony, the space of the stairwell, and blindness in a signifying chain.

All three characters discussed thus far—Lot’s wife, Belalouna, and Benillouche—bear the consequences of their surplus of vision, that is, of having seen more than they were intended to see: the meting out of divine punishment, the refraction of light on a natural mirror, the origins of a man. However, whereas Belalouna’s petrified eyes are the result of having been chosen for a particular sacrifice, Benillouche’s metaphorical petrification in the stairwell is the result of a willful gazing, a gesture of transgression tantamount to a subversion of the natural order. The characters’ names harbor the signs of this difference: in “Belalouna” one might hear \textit{bella luna}, or “beautiful moon” in Italian, evoking that celestial eye which gazes down upon humanity; in “Benillouche” the French-speaking reader hears, and reads, “il louche” (he squints) or perhaps even “son of he who squints” (as “ben” in Hebrew indicates “son of”). This not only inscribes Benillouche’s vision of the world in difference—as a compensatory way of seeing, perhaps, or a manner of supplementing failing vision—but also anchors his worldview genealogically. His looking back is more than a glance; it is an intense scrutiny of the world from which he comes.

\textbf{Written between Black and Blue: The Color of Truth and Fiction in \textit{The Scorpion} and \textit{L’écriture colorée}}

Written in 1969, \textit{The Scorpion} is Memmi’s third novel and the first to reveal a self-conscious concern with the presentation of text as a visual object. Memmi’s original plan to publish the book using different colors of text having proven far too costly, variants on the standard font are used to distinguish the five storylines present in the novel.\textsuperscript{64} Like \textit{Pillar}, \textit{The Scorpion} is set in pre-independence Tunisia and treats themes of identity and alterity; in this third novel, however, the thematic strands are taken up in a complex
structure of interwoven narratives. The visual artifice of employing several typefaces serves a practical purpose, for it provides the reader with a legend, or a typographical map of the layers of the novel, allowing each individual narrative to be instantly identified.

I will call the first layer (printed in a 12-point standard font) “Bina’s story.” This autodiegetic narrative thread opens the novel: a character named Bina recounts anecdotes from his life to an interlocutor who appears to be a psychoanalyst. That this silent partner in dialogue is indeed an analyst is evidenced by Bina’s use of apostrophe and his references to commonplace psychoanalytic discourse: “Doctor, maybe you’re thinking that I didn’t love my father?”65 Subsequent layers of narrative will call into question “the facts” as they appear in Bina’s story, and over the course of the novel it becomes clear that the texts forming Bina’s story are the very texts that a disappeared novelist named Emile (sometimes referred to as Imilio) has left behind in a desk drawer.

In the order of exposition, “Marcel’s story” appears next after Bina’s story and constitutes a second layer of autodiegetic narrative (printed in 10-point italics). Marcel, an ophthalmologist and the brother of the aforementioned missing novelist, Emile, has been charged with sorting through his brother’s papers in the hope of recovering the “fameux roman” he left behind, which an editor is keen to publish, though only if it can be reconstituted in its entirety. In a style that recalls the journal intime, Marcel not only comments on and reacts to the various papers he finds in his brother’s desk but also reflects upon and analyzes his own situation. Of all the layers of text contained within The Scorpion, Marcel’s story is the only one that is not discovered—in the tradition of the “found manuscript” trope—in Emile’s desk drawer.

The third layer consists of “Emile’s journal” (10-point standard font), a series of notes taken as he wrote “Histoire de Bina.” At times Emile’s journal so closely parallels the latter that it becomes difficult for Marcel (and for the reader) to distinguish between the two; one begins to wonder: is Emile inventing the autobiographi-
cal details in his journal, or is Bina’s story also Emile’s story? Matters are further complicated by the fact that in his journal, Emile sketches out a text entitled “History of Our Family,” and this family includes characters named both Marcel and Bina. There is one section of Emile’s journal that represents a diegetic divergence, despite its typographical continuity with the third layer. Titled “The Four Thursdays,” this intermediary section interrupts the flow of the novel. The narrative voice of this section is Emile’s; however, the story within is recounted via indirect discourse by a character identified only as J.H. Here, Emile, the former philosophy professor of J.H., occupies the position of the “analyst” as he listens to the young man’s “confession.”

The fourth layer of text is defined by Marcel as he attempts to make sense of Emilio’s papers. Represented in small capital letters, this layer consists of “notes, newspaper clippings that are carefully cut out and dated,” which I will call “Fragments.” Of the various layers, “Fragments” is the only one that does not present a coherent narrative; its content lacks a thread of discursive continuity, resembling more a patchwork of aphorisms, quotes, and bits of folklore.

Finally, a series of short pieces titled “Chronicle of the Kingdom of Within” closes the novel. Also printed in standard 12-point type, its column format nonetheless distinguishes it typographically from Bina’s story. These texts are introduced by the “Editor” (not by Marcel), who appears at the end of The Scorpion and claims that they constitute a portion of Emile’s found manuscript. “Chronicle” nevertheless ends with a short story titled “The Game of the Scorpion,” which links the end of this supplement to the episode that opens the novel (Bina’s description of a scorpion’s suicide).

This basic outline of the structure and parts of The Scorpion is integral to a deeper comprehension of the trope of blindness in the novel. Questions of sight (understood literally), including ocular maladies such as trachoma and dimming vision, recur in the text with an insistence surpassing that found in Pillar. Blindness in The Scorpion is put forth early in the novel as a medical reality linked
to the socioeconomic conditions of the Jewish ghetto in Tunis and to the difficulty of access to proper hygiene and medical care in many parts of Tunisia. Marcel, the eye doctor, is infuriated when faced with the new government’s decision to cut the budget allocated to the optometric center he founded and manages in Tunis: “[The minister] wants to cut back the budget for the Center by almost half, whereas even up until now we haven’t had very much, he knows it. ‘There are other matters needing urgent attention.’ More urgent than the country’s eyes!”

The eyes of the country: through this synecdoche, the eyes of Marcel’s compatriots are elevated to objects of national concern; conversely, the nation itself is reduced to the eyes of its people and haunted by the possibility of their failure. Marcel’s exclamation underscores the notion of the eye as a site of understanding; if the country has healthy eyes, then it has the potential to see clearly, to understand the progression of its history and the impact of its politics. The minister’s decision, which will inevitably cause the eyes of the country to become cloudy, is no less than a history-making moment, a point when a governing body makes a decision with negative repercussions for the bodies it governs. Through metaphor, Marcel’s profession is elevated to that of a national service: by keeping the corps of political subjects in good ocular health, he maintains the vigor of the body politic. This concern with the “state of the eye,” however, will shift from public to private, as Marcel, through the reading of his brother’s manuscript, grows increasingly concerned with Emile’s eyesight and laments that Uncle Makhlouf—their blind uncle, a sage capable of reciting scripture from the Torah by heart—refuses to seek treatment for his own eyes.

When Marcel makes his debut in the text, he has just read the excerpt from “Bina’s story,” which opens the novel and shares its title (“The Scorpion”). It is on the second page that Marcel takes up the narrative reins for the first time, delivering his “scientific” reading of the passage in which Emile (speaking as Bina) has recounted
the dramatic tale of a scorpion’s suicide: “Fine, only it’s not true: scorpions do not commit suicide. That’s a legend that circulates in Moorish cafes and old wives’ tales. Emile must have heard it in our father’s store, where he continues to find half of what he tells his readers; there’s not one of his stories that doesn’t give me the feeling I know it already.” This passage lays bare Marcel’s reading strategy: working from a position of scientific objectivity and profoundly attached to facts and the truth, Marcel demands nothing less than verisimilitude. His reading does not penetrate the surface of the text, and the only way he can accept such a perversion of the facts is to hope that the excerpt is part of Emile’s “fameux roman,” which he was said to be in the process of writing. A lack of truth in text, then, is permissible only in fiction.

Marcel’s vision of all things literary—“This childish mania for giving the least little thing an echo, a significance which is less clear than the thing itself! But maybe that’s what liter-a-ture is all about?”—lends irony to the fact that the task of reading and organizing his brother’s papers for publication has fallen upon him. Marcel’s attitude toward Emile’s “fameux roman” and all forms of literary expression would appear to disqualify him as a competent reader of his brother’s corpus. Paradoxically, it is the ophthalmologist who at first appears to be the most myopic reader in the text.

In the sing-songy “lit-er-a-ture” and the sarcastic “fameux roman,” one hears the taunts of a schoolyard bully who mocks the loner (the embodiment of difference) or the scorn of a pragmatist who despises flights of fancy. Yet despite his preconceived notions regarding poetics, it will become apparent that Marcel is in fact uniquely qualified for the task at hand, but not only because he is Emile’s brother and ostensibly well placed to understand him. That Marcel’s “fraternal” training (his knowledge of his brother) is superseded by his professional training and his eventual willingness to reconsider what it means to “see clearly” suggests an implicit critique of autobiographical reading. Ophthalmology, or what he calls “a marvelous profession that has no mystery about it,” reveals
itself to be crucial to the reconstitution of Emile’s novel; Marcel will learn that helping others to “see clearly” is not just a practical calling but also an aesthetic one. By reading the myriad layers of his brother’s text and thus immersing himself in poetics—a realm so different from his own science—Marcel becomes aware of the multiple facets of “vision,” the potentialities of the eye.

Several changes occur in Marcel’s text as he reads his brother’s: its tone moves from scorn to empathy, and as his interpretative skills improve, Marcel evolves from passive to active reader, eventually becoming, like Emile, a *scriptor*. Early in the text, through his commentaries on literature in general, Marcel displays an unwillingness to suspend disbelief. The veil of skepticism through which he reads the opening fragment, “The Scorpion,” continues to obscure his vision, and his original attacks on literature become personal attacks on Emile, until he realizes that some of his brother’s texts reveal—with varying degrees of “truth”—unpleasant details about their family: “Enough. I don’t want to get caught up in Emile’s game. What’s the point of it all? Is it a reconstruction using real elements, or merely day dreaming? Anyhow, he certainly doesn’t mean to use our name, just as it is, in a novel! Not that that shocks me (well, it does a little), but it would make the book less fictional, and that would be a mistake, wouldn’t it?” Although the initial tone is one of puerile irritation at the lack of clarity, the passage reveals Marcel’s latent critical capacity, for the questions raised engage issues of genre, verisimilitude, and creation. This reader may have somewhat parochial ideas about fact and fiction—he clearly states his unwillingness to accept any instability in generic categories—the final question, however, with its rhetorical “no?” casts doubt over the previous assertions, signaling the loosening of Marcel’s strict vision of literature and an evolution in his interpretative potential.

As the examples of Uncle Makhlouf and Emile will attest, philosophical vision—of the kind perceived by the inner eye—is inversely proportional to physical vision. After a visit to Uncle
Makhlouf’s house, Marcel takes up Emile’s papers only to read a series of notes sketched out for a portrait of their uncle (“Uncle Makhlouf—1, Notes for a Portrait”), in which Emile had recorded his own visit to the uncle. It is in this segment, while commenting on Uncle Makhlouf’s diminishing vision, that Emile reveals his own experience of early blindness: “(This slight haze that occurs more and more frequently and filled me with anxiety in the beginning—in the end I find it reassuring. It softens everything, takes away the unevenness and bitterness, makes everything less interesting as if nothing could reach me anymore. Of wisdom as near-sightedness of the soul—well, why not?)”75 The reference to physical blindness, something that Marcel can understand well from a scientific perspective—perhaps more readily than Emile’s literary “games”—compels him to read his brother with greater compassion: “Emile, what’s this about a ‘slight haze’? Does it really mean just that or is it symbolic? Why didn’t he ever come and see me about it?”76 And yet, for Emile, diminishing vision offers him a new way of seeing, one that he would prefer not to have corrected.

On Marcel’s journey from skeptical to compassionate reader, or from a reader unable to see the multiple meanings of the text despite his accurate vision to one alert to textual tactics and the possibility of multiple meanings, he himself becomes a writer. From the first time he takes over the narrative, Marcel is indeed writing a story, and while his text begins as a set of notes to help him understand his brother’s, it will, over time, begin to reflect a greater proportion of Marcel’s own reflections and anecdotes. This journey finds its apogee when Marcel realizes that he, too, is part of Emile’s “fameux roman”: “But your book is done! and it does have unity, and so does your life—it’s the whole, everything at once, The Scorpion, the Journal, the collages, and maybe even (forgive me) my own comments.”77 Marcel’s comment demonstrates that Emile’s text is not only “readerly,” that is, a text in the “classic” sense, but also “writerly”: as the reader, Marcel has the potential to write and thus create meaning in and of the text.78 It
is not only, as he once thought, by tending to eyes medically that he can help others to see, but also by understanding what others see as they look at the world through their own lenses—be they myopic or foggy—and by allowing for and accommodating multiple interpretative filters.

As is the case for Marcel’s character, in which a concern for real blindness coexists with a growing understanding of metaphorical blindness, literal and figurative forms of blindness commingle in the figure of Emile the writer. His increasingly poor eyesight appears to be the result of an effort to see the world (perhaps also himself) as clearly as possible. One of the fragments found in his desk drawer declares: “His entire work was a desperate effort to see more clearly; he ruined his eyes in the process.”⁷⁹ Ostensibly penned by Emile, this fragment written in the third person suggests a detachment from the self. More meaning may be gleaned from the fragment’s textual position, centered directly above the following entry from Emile’s journal: “The haze that’s thicker and thicker, and more and more persistent, the specks dancing around me more and more; and now those strange little flashes. I tried to think it was my dirty lenses attracting splinters of light, but it isn’t—it’s going on inside me. Sometimes tempted to go see Marcel. Never. . . . Our father, Aunt Louisa, Cousin George at the age of thirty—they’ve all gone blind, and soon it will be Uncle Makhlouf’s turn. That’s a lot for a single family; too many to be coincidence.”⁸⁰ This swan song for Emile’s vision, part prophecy, part resignation, is positioned directly under the fragment “His entire work . . .” cited above. Given its placement, cadence, and the finality of its tone, the fragment seems to function almost as an epitaph, a sort of “Here lies Emile’s oeuvre.” “His entire work” speaks to Emile’s life’s work, with the text placed beneath, “Haze that’s thicker and thicker,” standing in for the blind body of the writer, marking the site of loss.

Uncle Makhlouf, a character secondary to much of the plot of The Scorpion but nonetheless central to its symbolic system, em-
bodies the platonic epigram of this chapter: having all but lost his vision, the uncle is the most perspicacious “reader” in the text. When Emile asks him how he copes with his loss of sight, he responds: “Because of that, now I have to concentrate only on the texts I know by heart. A step in the right direction, certainly.” By limiting himself to the texts he knows by heart—sacred texts from the Torah—Uncle Makhlof develops an inner vision as his physical vision becomes increasingly compromised. Furthermore, as a reader and interpreter, Uncle Makhlof is a highly symbolic character, for his manner of reading and “writing” (commenting on the sacred texts) forms both a metanarrative of the story and a mise-en-abîme of its structure. In the following citation, Marcel reads Emile’s record of his visit to the uncle: “I listened to the uncle talk, and he talked and talked, . . . until the room became completely dark and for some time already I hadn’t been able to make anything out, whereas he continued to follow his silken threads, coming and going from one wall to another and talking all the while, mingling fables, meditations, quotations from the Cabala, from the Mishna, from the Sages, but always linking everything together perfectly, questioning one author to find the answer in another.” The Scorpion itself so closely resembles the uncle’s meanderings through darkness and through texts that one wonders if Uncle Makhlof is not its true author—a gesture that installs the novel in a loop whereby the text generates a character who in turn generates the text. His weaving of silken skeins allegorizes the weaving together of narrative strands (of different “colors”) within the text itself, creating a fabric whose dimensions the reader is never quite able to grasp—nor to unravel—despite the typographical legend provided by the text. Uncle Makhlof literally and figuratively holds the threads that comprise the narrative as it is staged, and like a master puppeteer his control of each individual element gives shape to the whole.

As mentioned earlier, Emile’s writings reveal a plan for color-coding discourse, a plan that is based on Uncle Makhlof’s long...
monologues that mix quotations from the Holy Scriptures with his own exegesis. Inspired by his uncle's change in tone of voice and facial expression as he narrates, navigating between the story of the Messiah, biblical citations, and his own interpretation, Emile seeks a way to translate the aural into the visual and to separate truth, fiction, and analysis: “Wouldn’t it be convenient to color a passage from the Haggadah differently from a passage from the Halakah or a passage from the book of Chronicles?”

The uncle, however, is not interested in such codification; he views problems of interpretation as a problem of inner vision: “You see,” he tells Emile, “the uncertainty is within yourself, because you do not see the whole.” That Uncle Makhlouf has no use for visual representation is not merely a function of his blindness; he believes in a kind of inner Icarian perspective, the pleasure of “seeing the whole” from within—an ability that reveals the fluid nature of the boundaries between fiction and truth.

Historical fact and fiction intermingle within the narrative of *The Scorpion* in ways that suggest furtive glances at the political realities of the period during which the action of the novel takes place. The sociohistorical context is latent in the text, hovering in the blind spot of the story. These events—namely, Tunisian independence in 1956 (although Tunisia is never explicitly mentioned) and the subsequent establishment of a nationalist government with pan-Arabic tendencies that would provoke a mass exodus of the Jewish community, mostly to France and Israel—are referred to only obliquely. Early in the text, in the context of a reflection on his uncle, Marcel reveals only the tiniest of clues that something important is happening in the country: “I have the feeling that anything I might say to him would slide off without really touching him, like water off a duck's back. Same impression when I talk to the new politicians. Now that the initial euphoria has worn off, I discover that they’re not much better than the old ones.” The initial moments of euphoria that accompanied the arrival of new politicians are clear references to the changing face of the Tunisian
government in the wake of independence, and while Marcel provides no explicit historical detail, his allusions nonetheless become increasingly limpid as the text progresses. Toward the middle of the novel, mentions of events with specific implications become more direct, and the reader can begin to deduce the basic facts of the story: “Things are happening fast—oh, just details, but so meaningful! Harder and harder to overlook. . . . Starting next year at school, all the seventh-grade classes will be conducted in Arabic. We’re not sure there’ll be room for Jeantou at the French lycée. Rather limply, I must say, I began rehashing my usual argument: since we’re going to be living in this country, why shouldn’t the children have the local kind of schooling; get their education in Arabic?”88 The explicit detail regarding changes in the country’s educational policies—namely, the Arabization of the school system—suffice to situate the text, temporally, in the immediate aftermath of decolonization.89 Although in The Scorpion there are few explicit references to the characters’ Judaism, their religious difference (from the majority of the newly independent state) is manifest in the concern over schooling in Arabic and the family’s growing sense of a need to flee.

Despite his medical training and his insistence upon the importance of clear vision, Marcel, as he becomes a better reader, writes—or admits; should we say confesses?—that he has been engaged in an operation of willful self-blinding by refusing to leave the country where, as his wife reminds him, they will soon have no place.90 Ironically, this refusal to see continues until Marcel becomes so ill that he hallucinates, and, paradoxically, the visions induced by this altered state produce clarity of thought. He awakens from his reveries lucid and determined to leave what has become an impossible situation. Only when he becomes a “good” reader, capable of reading through multiple lenses at the same time and of navigating the blind spots of Emile’s text, willing to leave scientific objectivity to the side, can he write his way out of the impossible situation created by history.
Vision in *The Scorpion*, as experienced by the three main characters, appears unstable and unreliable. Marcel, Emile, and Uncle Makhhlouf all experience a certain transcendence upon relinquishing their metaphorical grip on physical eyesight, suggesting that the effects of interrogating vision are salutary and therefore necessary. This may also be interpreted as challenging—albeit tacitly—the ideology of the Enlightenment and, by extension, of the colonial project. The instability of vision, however, which is so central to the narrative of *The Scorpion*, is underscored and, at the same time, subverted by the textual variations of the novel. Indeed, the use of typography to present the different discursive layers of the narrative suggests a primordial role for vision in the capacity for understanding to lead to interpretation. Furthermore, the existence of multiple signifying systems suggests a multiplication of signifying practices, both linguistic and visual.91

Memmi does begin to address these signifying practices in a paratextual note at the end of the novel; his explanation, however, remains somewhat cryptic and tethered to pragmatic considerations: “As the reader will realize, the type in this book should have been printed in several colors. . . . Because the publisher objected on technical grounds, arguing that the cost of such a book would be out of reach, we have had to make do with typographical variations. We rely on the reader to make an additional imaginative effort.”92 The ideal visual coding that Memmi was forced to renounce for his novel is inscribed within the narrative itself when Marcel reveals that Emilio’s texts are also written in a variety of colors: “I wondered why he changed ink so often—he seemed to be dipping his pen first in one inkwell and then in another. Now I feel certain that those different colors are not just a matter of chance.”93 Although Memmi’s note reveals the practical concerns regarding why he was unable to publish *The Scorpion* using different colors of text, he in fact leaves out the reasons behind the impulse to code the text at all. The reader understands that the different fonts correspond to different layers of discourse in *The Scorpion*; it is her
responsibility, then, through an effort of imagination, to determine (or not) which layer contains the true story and how each layer interacts with the others. As such, the typographical variants thus serve as a mere organizing tool, offering no supplement of meaning. Afifa Marzouki writes that the “colors” (or font variations) in *The Scorpion* produce

a writing where each shade is meant to correspond to a type of discourse, and where the colorfulness of the words and paragraphs is supposed to correspond to the waves of vision, to the back and forth of color and spirit, to the fluctuations of the texts and commentaries. It all occurs as if this vague project to color-code words came naturally from the will to organize the shambles of the work in such a manner as to allow the reader to find her way in this undulating text whose paternity is continually debated by the artist-poet and the analyst/essayist.94

Typographical play is of course not new in literature; one thinks readily of Apollinaire’s *calligrammes* and their pictorial qualities. Closer to Memmi, however, it is possible to identify an interest in manipulating the visual aspect of the novel in ways that often defy figurative referentiality or even logic. Maurice Roche, for example, in his novels from the 1960s and 1970s, subverts the genre of the novel by introducing “an extravaganza of languages and enigmatic designs.”95 Raymond Federman’s *Double or Nothing* (1971) also toys with text as a visual object, presenting the lines of his novel in a variety of configurations. The works of Roche, with their seemingly random pictorial and symbolic intrusions, and those of Federman, with their textual acrobatics, appear to belong to the domain of the ludic and perhaps even to challenge the signifying properties of signs and language.96 The visual effects of *The Scorpion*, however, are clearly designed to supplement and enhance understanding. Emile’s suggestion that his uncle’s “texts” might benefit from a system of color-coding functions as a *mise-en-abîme* of *The Scorpion*’s
typographical legend, as does Emile’s system of color-coding his own writings, remarked upon by Marcel. Whereas Roche’s Compact (1966) and Double or Nothing constitute a kind of guerrilla warfare on typography—and perhaps also on the conventions of the novel—scrambling meaning by multiplying its vectors, Memmi’s The Scorpion appears to make an earnest attempt to use the visual aspects of typography to elucidate the text.

In the years after the publication of The Scorpion, Memmi would continue to mull over the use of color in writing. In his 1986 essay L’écriture colorée; ou, je vous aime en rouge, he explicated a system of color-coding text that would go beyond facilitating the distinction of layers of narrative: “I wanted to employ colors in a more subtle and variegated way. It was no longer a question of making reading easier by using a convenient visual tool, a simple color scheme for the text, but to offer a new, true spectrum of meaning.”97 Rather than a theory on the use of color in distinguishing strands of narrative—as it had functioned in The Scorpion—L’écriture colorée proposes a system of colors that correspond to categories of language, which Memmi establishes as follows: “language of truth, analogical language, language of wish, language of imagination, language of emotion.”98 These five categories in turn are assigned corresponding colors; in this case, Memmi attributes black to truth, yellow to analogy, green to desire, blue to imagination, and red to emotion. A novel, then, would be written in blue, the language of fantasy or the imaginary, and a political speech could be written in any combination of colors; however, the colors would in turn exercise a regulatory effect on the text (and its author) by forcing the author to categorize his propositions. According to Memmi, such a system would prevent politicians from treachery and publicists from error by obliging them to reveal the true nature of their texts.99 The concept of l’écriture colorée is, for Memmi, a systematic attempt to ensure truth in authorship.

The mode of this essay is highly speculative, and while Memmi does address the technical challenges of implementing a system
of writing such as the one he prescribes, he does not deal with the deeper ethical issues it provokes. For in a system such as the one he proposes, an ultimate arbiter of meaning and truth would be required. Who would decide, otherwise, which texts should be “black” and which should be “blue”? Furthermore, the overall tone of the essay is one of such earnestness that it leads the reader to suspect that the entire proposition might be classified as ironic. Yet, irrespective of the ambiguity of the essay’s intent, its attempt to pose critical questions of literature in visual terms is a pertinent commentary on the doublings of language by the visual, and as such, it constitutes what might be called a “reverse ekphrasis”—a visual representation of a verbal representation.100

Looking Back Again: Postcolonial Visions

While the visual and its various permutations clearly occupy a significant tropological realm within Memmi’s oeuvre, it is hardly tempting to wrest a single, coherent theory of ocularcentrism or antiocularcentrism from this grouping of texts and their paratextual apparatus, for the contradictions of both positions are too readily obvious. Blindness, the visual, and representations of writing come together in Memmi’s work in ways that complicate any notion of pure oculaphilia or oculaphobia. To situate Memmi’s work, in its back-and-forth between an implicit critique of the visual and its celebration, as theorizing both Western European (ocularcentric) and Hebraic (oculaphobic, even iconoclastic) attitudes is already to advance our understanding of the œuvre’s engagement with one of the twentieth century’s major epistemological problems.

The postmodern eye is said to be enucleated or cast downwards, yet what of the postcolonial eye?101 How does the reaction against the hegemony of the gaze (of surveillance, even) function for postcolonial writers? Lacanian and Sartrean theories of the gaze and its capacity for “othering”—for seeing the other, for constituting the other as other—are at the heart of much of postcolonial theory. It
is not clear, however, that any nefarious properties of the gaze or vision can be undone by simply (metaphorically) gouging out the eyes of those who engage in such practices.

Postcolonial criticism seeks to highlight the capacity of the other to return the gaze, to look back, as it were, at the “empire.” In this manner, “looking back” becomes a gesture of defiance and challenge—something like “writing back.” Yet the concept of looking back thwarts one type of vision by replicating and reversing the colonial gaze. What is needed, as Martin Jay encourages, is “the multiplication of a thousand eyes, which . . . suggests the openness of human possibilities.” Thus, rather than repeating a series of unidirectional glances—be they totalizing or sidelong—a multifaceted perspective can emerge. This, I believe, is one way to constructively interpret the instability of the visual and visuality in Memmi’s work.

If the postcolonial subject may be understood as reified by the gaze of imperialism, it would hold then that as a postcolonial writer, Memmi might be interested in putting forth oppositional strategies to counteract the hegemony of vision. And to a certain extent, it is possible to read the characters of *The Scorpion* (particularly Uncle Makhlouf, but also Emile) as challenges to ocularcentrism—the uncle by embracing his own blindness and Emile by revealing the failures of attempts to systematize writing through its encoding. This challenge, in turn, might be read as a critique of Europe (historically considered to prize the realm of the visual and its concomitant power). However, a faith in the capacity of the visual to signify and the multiplication of visual objects in his texts would suggest an ocularcentric attitude, a nearly Enlightenment-style belief in the primacy of the eye and the ability of the other to transcend alterity through vision. Rather than choose sides in the debate over the denigration of vision, Memmi’s work theorizes the possibility of maintaining ocularcentrism and ocularphilia in a delicate balance.
Beginning in the 1950s, from one end of the Maghreb to the other, an explicit political awakening took place amongst intellectuals. They spoke not as Frenchmen but as colonized men. Jean Déjeux, “Quel avenir pour la littérature maghrébine de langue française?” (1990)

We know that the European empire belongs to a bygone era, but the Europeans don’t know it yet. Aimé Césaire, from a speech given at the meeting of the Comité d’action des intellectuels contre la poursuite de la guerre en Afrique du nord (1956)

To find a new order of things with Europe means putting new order in oneself. Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized (1991)

Published in 1957, during an era of intense anticolonial activity, Albert Memmi’s seminal book-length essay The Colonizer and the Colonized aspires to describe a universal condition while remaining firmly grounded in a particular situation. From its original context of North African colonization and decolonization, it has come to stand as an extended metaphor for colonial conflicts—and analogous situations of oppression—throughout the world.¹
The essay’s trajectory over time and across international borders speaks to the relevance of Memmi’s analysis for other instances of colonization and dominance—a phenomenon further underscored by the text’s availability in multiple translations. Moreover, and perhaps as a result of its grounding in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, with its depiction and analysis of the interconnectedness of colonizer and colonized within the colonial situation, laid the foundation for further examinations of the interdependence of human relationships in a broader social context. In essays such as *Dominated Man: Notes toward a Portrait* (1968), *Dependence: A Sketch for a Portrait of the Dependent* (1979), and *Le buveur et l’amoureux* (The drinker and the love-struck man, 1998), Memmi defined and analyzed larger dialectical concepts such as the relation of dominator and dominated or purveyor and dependent. Meanwhile, in order to understand and lay bare the mechanisms behind certain dualisms, Memmi assigned himself the task of defining racism, a definition later adopted by the *Encyclopédie universalis*. That endeavor, in turn, led him to the invention of the concept of “heterophobia,” a more capacious characterization of the rejection of alterity or “the refusal of the other on the basis of any difference.”

Gesturing toward the possibility of general typologies, the title of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* already announces the essay’s universal aspirations; in contrast to this somewhat sweeping ambition, however, is its status as a document of colonialism unique to the Maghreb of the 1950s and perhaps even to the author himself. This specificity is made evident in Joëlle Strike’s analysis of *Colonizer* as participating in what she has dubbed Memmi’s intertextual autographic discourse, and in Nadine Gordimer’s critique of the essay, in which she suggests that Memmi’s analyses are overdetermined by his experience of the Maghreb and do not hold for other regions (most notably Gordimer’s native South Africa). Other readings reinforce the particularism of the text by suggesting that the twin essays forming *The Colonizer and the Colonized* are not a
diptych of two distinct types but rather a single, composite portrait of its author’s plural identity. Memmi’s biographical particularity, or what might be called his internal schism—his status as a colonized, French-educated Jew in an Arab land—is often put forward as a motivating factor in the author’s choice to represent both the colonizer and the colonized. As in other instances, Memmi’s own commentary on the text has contributed to such autobiographical interpretations; in his own preface to the 1966 edition of Colonizer, he noted that “In truth, I knew the colonizer from the inside almost as well as I knew the colonized.”

Issues of universalism and particularity notwithstanding, it is worth moving away from this double bind in order to explore the textuality of Colonizer and its function as an expressly literary artifact. Undoubtedly as a result of the circumstances of the essay’s publication and the urgency of the political conjuncture at the time, the rich textuality of Colonizer is often overlooked in favor of content-based or sociological analyses. Often read as the most stable and objective of the various anticolonial essays that emerged contemporaneously—Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism (1955) and Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1961), most notably—The Colonizer and the Colonized nevertheless deploys a rhetoric of irony, stages dialogical operations, and subverts stereotypes—all of which suggest that the text may be less neutral than it appears at first glance. Derrida’s notion that “a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game/internal play” provides a valuable interpretative framework, allowing Colonizer to be understood as a showcase of internal play that creates instability within the text itself and that, as a result, is disruptive of totalizing construals of anticolonial discourse.

If this sustained attention to the textuality of Colonizer allows for the production of new, pertinent readings, it is also true that the essay’s paratextual apparatus demands equal attention, particularly insofar as the paratext may also be understood as consti-
tutive of the work itself. While an argument in favor of reading paratextual and textual elements in tandem would likely hold, to varying degrees, for any literary object, the paratexts of Colonizer (particularly its prefaces and criticism, as well as interviews given by the author) have been of notable importance in the essay’s reception. Because nearly all anticolonial essays penned by francophone writers in the 1950s were accompanied by prefatory remarks written by Western intellectuals, a comparative analysis of this paratextual material reveals the ways in which European thinkers have informed and, in some cases, overdetermined the reception of the texts they championed.

Paratexts may also function diachronically, and this is particularly salient in the case of Memmi’s 2004 Decolonization and the Decolonized. To read the more recent essay as an epilogue, or a sequel, to the 1957 Colonizer is to posit a paratextual relationship between the two, with the newer text generating an understanding of changes over time and thus illuminating the older text, while the 1957 essay in turn becomes a touchstone for Memmi’s 2004 effort. Notwithstanding the interpretative possibilities produced through this novel understanding of diachronic paratextuality, it would be a mistake to reduce the import of Decolonization and the Decolonized to that of appendage or prosthesis whose sole function would be to compensate for a perceived lack in the 1957 diptych. Certainly, the change in authorial persona from 1957 to 2004 is striking: whereas close reading of Colonizer reveals the deep inscription of Memmi’s subjectivity in the text, in Decolonization and the Decolonized we witness a nearly complete abdication of authorial identification with the object of his study. Stated differently, in sketching a portrait of the “decolonized Arab-Muslim,” Memmi appears to have written himself—a decolonized Jew—out of the story. However, this evolution from partial object to full subject is part of a larger story of Memmi’s rise to authorial autonomy, a story that, in turn, must also be read in light of its own context and paratext.
In the pairing of text and paratext, it is impossible to ignore the echo of the colonizer and the colonized. The parallel is not only morphological—the first pair contains the phoneme “text” just as the second pair contains the base verb “colonize”—but substantive: in both cases two elements that initially appear to be in opposition reveal their symbiotic natures. J. Hillis Miller reminds us that the polysemy of the prefix “para” allows for the existence of relationships whose diametric opposition masks a profound contingency:

“Para” is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something inside a domestic economy and at the same time outside it, something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in “para,” moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside (my italics).14

Beyond the fact that Miller’s definition of “para” (which Genette calls “a rather nice description of the activity of the paratext”)15 and Memmi’s definition of the colonial situation both resonate with Hegelian dialectics, this grouping of pairs points up the essential ambiguity of Memmi’s authorial position in The Colonizer and the Colonized. Like a “thing in ‘para,’” Memmi’s particular situation places him “simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out” or, to cite Memmi himself, as knowing both the colonizer and the colonized “from the inside.” He is thus able to theorize a new subject position while intervening in debates on the colonial situation. Functioning as a “permeable membrane” that both divides and connects, the ambiguity of his authorial persona in turn produces an ambiguous text whose import is derived as much from what is said about it as what it says.
Anticolonial Discourse in the 1950s: Correspondences and Contexts

Any discussion of The Colonizer and the Colonized must account for the unique historical moment in which it was produced. It is essential, therefore, to contextualize the essay by emphasizing both the existence of, and Memmi’s participation in, a broader anticolonial discourse. In all historical periods, decades overflow their chronological borders, and the 1950s are no exception. In this study, the bookends used to articulate the limits of the anticolonial era take the form of Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” which served as the preface to Léopold Sedar Senghor’s 1948 anthology of négritude poetry, and Frantz Fanon’s 1961 The Wretched of the Earth (also prefaced by Sartre), thus suggesting a long decade of anticolonial sentiment and action. Arguably originating several decades earlier with the various political engagements of the négritude movement, anticolonial sentiment in the 1950s took on specific forms and a particular intensity in response to the colonial situation in North Africa.16 Made possible by material conditions of publication and dissemination available within the metropole and the patronage of a number of French intellectuals (Jean-Paul Sartre in particular), the publication of Memmi’s essay—along with works by Césaire and Fanon—signaled the emergence of the colonized subject as an engaged intellectual and as an active participant not only in the anticolonial struggle but also in the theorization of that struggle. Colonizer, however, stands in contrast to the general anticolonial rhetoric of the decade; by virtue of its focus on the situation and psychology of both parties, that is, on the colonizer as well as the colonized, it troubled the very binary logic that other essays sought to underscore.

Beginning with the independence of Morocco in November 1955 and of Tunisia in March 1956, and the outbreak in 1954 of what would become a bitter and protracted struggle for an independent Algeria, the decade bore witness to the beginning of the disman-
tlement of France’s colonial regime. Insofar as two-thirds of the Maghreb had already gained its independence, the second half of the decade could be properly called “postcolonial”; the 1950s as a whole, however, might be more usefully described as anticolonial, for it is during this time that an anticolonial discourse—embodied by essays and manifestos by writers hailing from both sides of the Mediterranean, that is, by both the colonizer and the colonized—began to emerge as a significant form of resistance and to constitute a theoretical corpus. While it would be impossible to detail all of the elements that comprised the fabric of anticolonial discourse during this period, it is helpful to chart the interconnectedness of a certain number of texts and events that contributed to defining the era in which *Colonizer* was conceived, written, and published.

Given the predominance of Sartrean thought during the period in question, it should come as no surprise that any discussion of transnational anticolonial discourse in the 1950s owes a debt to the existentialist philosopher. In an article titled “Sartre’s Legacy in Postcolonial Theory,” Donald Wehrs suggests that Sartre’s work on behalf of the anticolonial struggle should be understood as a prescient forerunner to postcolonial studies: “While the serious study of African cultures’ internal historicity began only in the 1970s and ’80s, anticolonial theory developed in Paris between the late 1940s and early 1960s. From ‘Orphée noir’ (1948) to his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Sartre depicted colonialism as emblematic of all human violence and struggle against colonialism as paradigmatic of all resistance.”

Positing “Black Orpheus”—the preface to Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*—as a starting point for anticolonial discourse is pertinent insofar as it was the first in a series of prefatory texts Sartre would write for anticolonial essays penned by authors from the colonized world. Charles-André Julien, the editor of the collection in which the anthology appeared, underscored this fact in his avant-propos: “We knew that Jean-Paul Sartre refused to write prefaces and still we were sure that he
would accept to testify on behalf of the black people.” Significantly, “Black Orpheus” is not only the first preface Sartre agreed to write but also his first written attack against colonialism and racism. As the incipit for an era of anticolonial discourse, “Black Orpheus” nonetheless presents significant complexities: unlike the prefaces to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, the essay presents a collection of poetry rather than a treatise against colonization; moreover, the preface appears to focus more directly on racism and négritude (as a response to racism and exploitation) than on issues of colonization and imperialism. Racism and colonialism, however, are intimately linked; as Memmi would later write in *Colonizer*: “Racism sums up and symbolizes the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized.”

Sartre hints at this in the early portion of his long preface to Senghor’s anthology, when he identifies the intended readers of the poems it features: “If, however, these poems give us shame, it is not with that conscious purpose; they have not been written for us. All those, colonist and accomplice, who open this book, will have the sensation of reading as though over another’s shoulder, words that were not intended for them. It is to black men that these black poets address themselves; it is for them that they speak of black men.” An implicit conflation between race and colonial status is thus at work in the text: the poems, according to Sartre, are written by blacks for blacks. The colonizers—the “colonist and accomplice” with whom Sartre identifies by virtue of the first-person plural pronoun “us”—are seemingly accidental narratees. Logically then, the black audience to whom the black poets direct their writings make up the opposite camp: the colonized. In this manner, the manifest intention of “Black Orpheus” to lead the way (for a white readership) into “this world of ebony” is doubled by the gesture of a Western intellectual leading the way for the colonizer to a better understanding of the colonized.

The presentation of poetry from the colonized world is also the occasion for one of the first critiques of colonialism to appear in
Les Temps modernes, the journal helmed by Sartre himself. Published in 1949 and transcribed from the songs of nomadic tribes wandering the Western Atlas region of the Maghreb, “Poèmes de la résistance berbère (Maroc central)” [Poems of the Berber Resistance (Central Morocco)] represents indigenous reactions to the arrival and implantation of French forces in the region: “The sheep, massacred; the camels, massacred; the people, massacred! Frenchie came over the ridge.”22 If the chants are patently anti-French, the introduction to the poems makes plain their implicit critique of colonization:

Berber virtues were, above all, social virtues. The very concept of virtue was, in some way, a sort of clan mentality or fraternity (“taymat”). . . . In the absence of a political structure, it is this clan mentality that gave the small Berber societies a semblance of internal cohesion that was crucial to their existence. . . . Today, with the security and political and administrative organization that we have brought, the rapid sedentarization of these tribes and the improvement in the quality of life all conspire, naturally, to the weakening of this clan structure/mentality. We have been criticized for this: “The French have created a situation of every man for himself.”23

In prefacing these poems, the European editors take on the mantle of mediator, even translator (in the literal and figurative senses of the term) of the anticolonial message. Whereas the anti-imperial content of the Berber resistance poems ranges from latent to manifest, the reader nonetheless depends upon the editors’ explanation of how colonialism has undone the indigenous cultural structures. The publication of the Berber resistance poems in Les Temps modernes points up another aspect of Sartre’s influence on the emerging anticolonial discourse; as the director of a review that held a “cultural monopoly over its era,” Sartre’s editorial position afforded him a role as arbiter and even trendsetter in matters of
politics and culture. The journal was deeply committed not only to examining the question of colonization but also to defending the interests of the colonized. Indeed, the journal’s engagement with the “phenomenology of colonial confrontation” dates to the 1940s and French military action in Indochina; from that point forward the journal sought to increase awareness of the various sites of colonial conflict by publishing works written by colonized intellectuals and by soliciting reviews of their works and articles written by those with firsthand knowledge of events on the ground. Such were the auspices under which Memmi came to publish excerpts of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, under the title “Portrait du colonisé” [Portrait of the colonized], in April 1957, several months prior to the publication of the book in its entirety. The editorial mission of *Les Temps modernes* thus positioned the journal to make a significant contribution to the promulgation and dissemination of anticolonial discourse during the 1950s.

The early 1950s also saw the publication of two book-length essays that treated, albeit from drastically different points of view and in diametrically opposed manners, issues of colonialism and racism: Octave Mannoni’s *Psychologie de la colonisation* (1950) and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). The latter is now generally considered a classic of postcolonial studies; the former has gained more notoriety from attacks made upon it than from any serious consideration of its hypotheses within the domain of postcolonial thought. Emily Apter, who suggested that Mannoni’s work in ethnopsychiatry might be appreciated for its scrutiny of European imperial culture, hastened to add that any attempt to rehabilitate Mannoni should be tempered by a consideration of his “cultural essentialism” and “transparent ethnocentricity.” In light of such charges, the mention of *Psychologie de la colonisation* in a survey of anticolonial discourse might seem tendentious. Nonetheless, given the importance of psychoanalysis in postcolonial studies and the influence of Mannoni’s work on both Fanon and Memmi (particularly in the development of “the Nero complex”),
it is worth positing its contribution as one of the first texts to seek to understand the psychology of the colonial relationship.30

The trajectory of Fanon’s _Black Skin, White Masks_ has been considerably less fraught than that of Mannoni’s _Psychologie_. Like Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” Fanon’s essay appears, at first glance, to focus on racism rather than colonialism. While it is true that almost all of the chapters deal with questions of race (“The Negro and Language,” “The Negro and Recognition”), _Black Skin_ produces a specifically anticolonial discourse in several ways. In the chapter titled “The So-Called Dependency Complex of the Colonized,” which falls in the middle of the tome and which questions Mannoni’s positions in _Psychologie_, Fanon engages directly with questions of colonialism by suggesting that Mannoni’s discovery of an inferiority complex inherent to the colonized (and predating colonization) is a fallacy. Fanon furthers his critique by suggesting alternative interpretations of the dream analysis of colonized subjects that Mannoni uses to substantiate his claims of indigenous neurosis.31 In addition, the questions of racial oppression so central to the essay are posed in such a way as to imply a colonial relationship; at the end of the chapter titled “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” Fanon writes: “From the moment the Negro accepts the separation imposed by the European he has no further respite.”32 Like the amalgam of European/white man/colonizer that we saw in Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” here again the opposition of “Negro” to “European” creates an implicit amalgam between the black man and colonized individual, on the one hand, and European and colonizer, on the other, thus fusing together racial and colonial categories.33

Published in 1955, Aimé Césaire’s _Discourse on Colonialism_ was the first of three significant, overtly anticolonial essays published by non-Western intellectuals (_The Colonizer and the Colonized_ and _The Wretched of the Earth_ round out the trio).34 Well known already in French intellectual circles as a négritude poet, Aimé Césaire published _Discourse on Colonialism_ with Présence Africaine, the
publishing house and cultural center where “novelists, essayists and thinkers from the Black World [could] at last express themselves and witness the dissemination of their works.” At fifty-nine pages, *Discourse on Colonialism* is the shortest of the three essays; it is also the most exhortative in tone, adopting “the role and voice of counsel for the prosecution, presenting the case for the colonized world against a corrupt and decadent Europe.” While both Fanon and Memmi would engage the question of the negative impact of colonization on Europe, Césaire is perhaps the boldest of the three in his denunciation of the West: “Europe,” he writes on the very first page of *Discourse*, “is indefensible.” More nuanced in his denunciation of colonization, Memmi would argue in the conclusion of *Colonizer* that “the colonizer is a disease of the European,” thus removing a degree of agency or willful mallevolence from the equation. Furthermore, Césaire’s approach is steeped in Marxist ideology and owes very little (if anything) to psychoanalysis, another aspect that sets his work apart from that of Fanon and Memmi.

Despite the fact that the following two years, 1955 and 1956, would bring independence to both Morocco and Tunisia, the production and dissemination of anticolonial discourse showed no signs of waning. Indeed, the circumstances in Algeria were such that independence in the rest of the Maghreb amounted to something of a detail in the broader political landscape. In January 1956 the Comité d’action des intellectuels contre la poursuite de la guerre en Afrique du nord held a rally at the Salle Wagram in Paris. In attendance were Jean Amrouche, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Aimé Césaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others. The March–April (1956) issue of *Les Temps modernes* published several of the speeches made at the rally, including Césaire’s “La mort des colonies” [The death of colonies] and Sartre’s “Le colonialisme est un système” [Colonialism is a system]—the philosopher’s first stand-alone anticolonial essay.
Just as political and intellectual activity was gaining momentum and becoming amplified throughout the 1950s, the terminology of anticolonial discourse was also evolving. Coined in France, the concept of the “third world” was taken to global proportions at the Bandung Conference of 1955, where the countries of the nonaligned movement claimed the term for themselves. Analogous to the revolutionary notion of le tiers état [the third estate] coined by l’Abbé Sieyès, “the third world” was developed in a 1952 article by French demographer Alfred Sauvy, “Trois mondes, une planète”: “We speak easily of two worlds particularly as we are confronted with the possibility of their going to war, their coexistence, etc., too often forgetting that there is a third world, the most important of the three, and all said and done, the first in the chronology. It is made up of those that are called, un-style, underdeveloped countries.” Although Sauvy’s article was a plea in favor of the colonized world and recently independent peoples—“this Third World, ignored, exploited and scorned like the Third Estate, also wants to make something of itself”—he would later recant and denounce the term as reductive: “Do allow the creator of the expression ‘the Third World,’ now almost 40 years later, to repudiate the term, as it tends to make us forget the growing diversity of cases. Placing all the countries of black Africa and ‘the four dragons’ under a single term does not do us much good.” Notwithstanding Sauvy’s perspicacious self-criticism regarding the limits of his term, “third world” has remained in circulation.

As the decade of the 1960s loomed large, anticolonial discourse continued to be fueled in France by two texts in particular: Jean Amrouche’s 1958 article, “La France comme mythe et comme réalité” [France as myth and as reality], and Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth. An anticolonial treatise published in Le Monde, Amrouche’s essay has garnered very little attention in general and none at all from specialists seeking the roots of current postcolonial theory in the anticolonial discourse of the 1950s. This is unfortunate given Amrouche’s unique approach to the question: rather
than focus on racism or the hegemony of Europe, he develops and analyzes the concept of a mythical France—a notion engendered and mobilized by France itself—and examines the ways in which a delusional national self-image contributed not only to imperialism and colonization, but to France’s continuing difficulties in navigating its nascent postcolonial relationships (namely with Indochina and the recently independent Morocco and Tunisia) or, in a larger sense, its relationships with all that is foreign:

When it comes to foreigners, French behavior has hardly varied since the time of Montesquieu. Of course, the French now eat less bread, are less ignorant of geography, and they are beginning to admit that a Persian might want to be Persian, even if he admires France. . . . But the Frenchman conceives of the universal as an extension of French characteristics, and by reducing any foreign reality to these characteristics. He remains under the spell of a mythology that makes it difficult for him to recognize the other, whoever he may be, as other.44

What Amrouche brings into stark relief here, beyond the question of difference, is the problem of “foreignness,” specifically as it relates to France; indeed, he is the only intellectual of the era to directly question the persistence of concepts such as universality (as they relate to colonialism) and attempt to dismantle them. Rarely mentioned in anticolonial discourse of the era, the notion of the foreign and the irrational fear of the foreign would later be theorized by Memmi in his concept of heterophobia.45

Finally, this concentration of anticolonial fervor, which would come to a political end with the 1962 Evian Accords and an independent Algeria, came to its literary end with the 1961 publication of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, accompanied by Sartre’s preface. Like Memmi, Fanon was interested in the psychological effects of colonialism; unlike Memmi, Fanon used the form of the anticolonial essay to propose ways by which the colonized might liberate themselves from the colonial yoke—namely,
through revolt and violence. It is nonetheless a text that presents a
deeper philosophy of anticolonialism, rejecting European models
in favor of a new ontology.46 Today, it is *Wretched*, perhaps more
than any other anticolonial text from the era in question, that is
held up by scholars in the field of postcolonial studies as the para-
gon of anticolonial discourse.

It is clear, then, that when *The Colonizer and the Colonized* was
published in 1957, it did not emerge in a vacuum but rather from
within a particular discursive formation and a specific context of
anticolonial ideology and action. During the heightened politi-
cal activity and intellectual engagement in the Tunisia of 1955 and
1956, Albert Memmi was already at work on the twin essays; the
book manuscript was nearly finished in 1957 when he and his fam-
ily left Tunisia to settle permanently in Paris, and early that same
year excerpts of the text were published as stand-alone pieces in
both *Les Temps modernes* and *Esprit*.47 Several months later, and
prior to the book’s publication by Corrèa, *Les Temps modernes*
published Jean-Paul Sartre’s review of Memmi’s essay. This piece,
which would become the official preface to *Colonizer* and would
be included in all subsequent French editions and in all transla-
tions, lent credibility and cachet to Memmi’s text.48

Yet, despite its patent connections to the works of Mannoni,
Fanon, Césaire, Amrouche, and Sartre, Memmi’s essay diverges
in several ways from its contemporaries. Unlike many of these es-
says, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* did not prescribe solutions
to the colonial problem; rather, it sought to provide an analysis of
the hypocrisy of colonial behavior and the self-abnegation of the
colonized subject: “How could the colonizer look after his work-
ers while periodically gunning down a crowd of the colonized?
How could the colonized deny himself so cruelly yet make such
excessive demands? How could he hate the colonizers yet admire
them so passionately?”49 Indeed, the lack of proposed solutions
was a source of contention; as one critic wrote: “Memmi was al-
ways more interested in describing the miserable condition of the

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dominated than in proposing solutions.” This purported lack of concrete solutions seems to have mattered less to Memmi’s foreign readership; as the author notes: “My foreign readers were the first to write to me to say how surprised they were by the kind of necessity of the mechanisms that regulate the relationship between colonizers and colonized.”

Whether or not these texts provide solutions to the problems they address is but one area of difference. The status of the author is equally, if not more, relevant here. Texts such as Sartre’s prefaces, Psychologie de la colonisation, Black Skin, White Masks, and Discourse on Colonialism feature an unambiguous authorial persona: Sartre as an engaged Western intellectual, Mannoni from the point of view of a European in situ, and Fanon and Césaire as colonized intellectuals. The Colonizer and the Colonized, however, poses a problem from the outset: how can one individual represent both the colonizer and the colonized? Mannoni’s attempt to do so (albeit with an emphasis on the aspect he knew best, that of the colonizer) was greeted with charges of ethnocentrism and essentialism. Memmi’s identity, however, and particularly his status as a Tunisian Jew seem to have placed him in a unique position with respect to the colonizer-colonized binary: he was presumed to stand outside the conflict. As Sartre wrote in his review of The Colonizer and the Colonized, Memmi “represents no one, but since he is everyone at once, he will prove to be the best of witnesses.”

Coupled with the dialectical implications of the essay’s title, this statement has in some ways overdetermined readings of The Colonizer and the Colonized, leading to the belief that it is a balanced and objective analysis of the colonial situation. Yet its “passionate geometry,” as Sartre called it, is anything but symmetrical: Memmi’s authorial voice does not rise in neutral omniscience but rather deploys an ambiguity that begs deeper consideration: who indeed does Memmi represent, and how?
Textual Strategies and the Authorial Voice in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*

In light of the historical and political crucible in which *The Colonizer and the Colonized* was both conceived and published, it is not surprising that sociological and psychological readings have dominated the critical response to the essay. The text, after all, was a document of its time that sought to both describe and elucidate a set of very real phenomena. However, as a work of theory whose sustained value has become somewhat less tethered to its historical conjuncture, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* benefits immeasurably from the deployment of interpretative tools capable of accounting for the essay’s internal instabilities and its status as a textual object. Close analysis reveals strategies of irony (in the form of rhetorical figures such as litotes), as well as the unconventional use of stereotype and dialogism, which combine to project a different portrait of the essay. More than simply so many flourishes of authorial virtuosity, these strategies suggest a continuity of Memmi’s authorial subterfuge (tactics that both reveal and conceal his identity, as seen in his novels); stage a rebuttal to notions that the tone of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* is neutral or objective; and constitute the sites where the author’s subjectivity is most palpable. Furthermore, in Memmi’s later essay (2004), it is the disappearance of these very tactics, or the apparent abandonment of these strategies, that signals a seemingly definitive sea change in the authorial operation.

In its reviews and prefaces, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* is characterized as an objective and impartial description of the colonizer and the colonized, an assessment shared by critics and readers on both sides of the colonial drama. In his pre-publication review of *Colonizer*, Sartre wrote, “This lucid and sober work may be classed among the ‘passionate geometries,’ for its calm objectivity represents transcendence of suffering and anger.” Likewise, francophone Malagasy poet and political leader Jacques Rabé-
mananjara, speaking from the point of view of a formerly colonized subject, notes a divergence in tone between Memmi’s essay and the two other major anticolonial essays of the era (Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* and Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*):

The two Antilleans incite us, straight away, to take a combative attitude against the colonial problem, a pitiless offensive supported by the vigor of a dialectic of sworn polemicists. Albert Memmi, the Tunisian, initiates us into a completely different strategy: the struggle is not proclaimed with fanfare, it is born from the facts themselves . . . Like us, Memmi is a victim of the system, but he neither screams his revolt nor gives vent to his shame. It even seems as though he shows a marble-like serenity, he enjoys a certain distance, as if the question didn’t concern him, as if he wasn’t immersed in it just like the rest of us.54

According to Rabémananjara, the effect of this calculated, rigorous treatment of a polemical topic that aroused, under the pens of Memmi’s Antillean counterparts, the emotions and ire of the colonizer is one of narrative omniscience. If Fanon’s pen is a hatchet, Memmi’s is a scalpel that delivers “a sober, precise, and dense style, words and phrases whose elegance betrays neither the simplicity nor the clear ductility of its thought.”55 It is significant that the author is described as distant and unconcerned, somehow exterior to the conflict he describes. According to Rabémananjara, Memmi’s intention is one of scientific calculation; his method: just the facts.56

Writing somewhat more generally about the ensemble of Memmi’s œuvre, Michel Contat made the following observation in his 1985 review of *Ce que je crois*: “The principal ideas of his work have become so consubstantial with democratic thought that, as one rereads them today in this radiantly clear book, they tend to take on the slightly pale transparency of testamentary truisms.” Contat’s carefully worded review echoes the sentiment expressed by Ver- cors’s letter to Memmi: “Like all very plain things that, when called
to mind, suddenly appear obvious, we never thought of thinking about it.” While neither one speaks explicitly of objectivity, both hint that the limpidity of Memmi’s text (be it *The Colonizer and the Colonized* or other works) is easily mistaken as superficial.

Yet, in the above-mentioned appreciations of *Colonizer*, the qualification of the essay as objective, reasoned, and dispassionate is never motivated by textual evidence. Furthermore, the notion of Memmi’s essay as a factual report is contradicted by the reality—corroborated by Memmi himself—that *Colonizer* contains almost no “facts” at all: “Up to this point,” writes Memmi toward the end of the essay, “I had forsworn the convenience of numbers and statistics.” By contrast, one might consider Memmi’s essay alongside Sartre’s “Le colonialisme est un système,” which furnishes dates and statistics—verifiable data—to prove the existence of torture, starvation, and other ills brought about in Algeria as a result of the colonial war and to argue for a rapid end to the conflict in the form of an independent Algeria. Although *Colonizer* is based on a certain form of empirical evidence—*le vécu* or lived experience, as Memmi terms his phenomenological approach—the observations and analyses it contains cannot necessarily be given the status of fact.

It would appear, therefore, that the interpretation of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* as a balanced, objective vision of the colonial situation could be imputed to three elements: its title, the instance of narration, and the paratextual information (outlined above) that has declared it as such. Frustrating a reader’s expectation that the colonized speak only in the name of the colonized, Memmi uses the third person to narrate the portraits of both colonizer and colonized, thereby representing his own people in the sense of both “speaking-for” and “re-presenting,” or *vertreten* and *darstellen*. It is undoubtedly the third-person narration that lends an air of objectivity to the essay and insinuates that the author’s investment in both portraits is similar and impartial. Moreover, the title of the work announces a study of two parties on opposite sides of a con-
flict, thus suggesting an approach similar to arbitration. The text-

tual presentation further underscores the notion of a balanced, or
neutral, approach: the two portraits are almost identical in length
(sixty-six pages for “Portrait of the Colonizer” and sixty-three pag-
es for “Portrait of the Colonized”) and each is divided into three
sections, which are in turn divided by subtitles. Beginning with the
first paratextual elements the reader encounters, *The Colonizer and
the Colonized* thus appears tempered and evenhanded, while its
structure further emphasizes its presumed impartiality.

Rather than so many signs of neutrality, however, this conjunc-
tion of elements might well be viewed as one of the defining char-
acteristics of the essay *qua* genre: it “coordinates elements, rather
than subordinating them.” To be sure, the formal particularities
of the essay as such make it tempting to set the question of ob-
jectivity against the nature of the genre Memmi selected for his
“trial” of colonialism. Because of its invention in sixteenth-century
France by Michel de Montaigne, the modern essay is often quali-
fied as a French form. Like the use of the French language by
colonized subjects of the French empire, the use of this “French”
genre by colonized intellectuals has not gone unnoticed. Writing
about the 1950s essays of Césaire, Amrouche, Memmi, and Fanon,
David Murphy argues for a kind of doubled “writing back” (em-
bodied both in language and form): “the colonized’s decision to
argue their case for the end of colonial rule through the *essai*
form might be seen as both an assertion of their intellectual ability and,
consequently, of their right to independence: having mastered the
art of reason, the colonized should be given the rights due to all
'Men,' and be allowed to govern their own destinies.”

Irrespective of the provenance of the essay (and the disputable
notion of “cultural” ownership of a genre), it is my interest here to
examine the ways in which the nature of the essayistic mode—pro-
teiform and elusive though it may be—may further challenge the
qualification of “objectivity” put forth with respect to *The Colonizer
and the Colonized*. As an essayist insisting on the value of “le vécu”
as the foundation for his work, Memmi is linked to Montaigne, for whom the essay was also rooted in lived experience. In his autographic preface to Colonizer, which was written for the second edition in 1966 and appears in all subsequent editions, Memmi suggests that the motivation for Colonizer was highly personal, rooted in a particular story: “It would be equally untrue to say that my ambition in painting this portrait of one of the major oppressions of our time was to describe oppressed peoples in general; it was not even my intention to write about all colonized people. I was Tunisian, therefore colonized. I discovered that few aspects of my life and my personality were untouched by this fact.” Memmi’s own definition of the project he set forth to accomplish is thus reminiscent of the method of essayistic writing in general, insofar as it makes “heuristic and hermeneutical ‘probes’ of phenomena, without utilitarian or universalizing intent.” What’s more, while being careful not to overstate the case an author makes for his own work or to blindly trust his evaluation of his text, it is nonetheless significant to note the importance placed on personal experience in the above passage. The Colonizer and the Colonized and the essay as a genre both speak in a voice that is anything but objective. As Peter France reminds us: “Whatever the ostensible subject, though, a central feature of the essay is the felt personal presence of the essayist, whether explicit or implicit. . . . Sometimes—and notably in Montaigne—the essay is overtly consubstantial with the essayist: ‘je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre.’ It is an exercise in self-portraiture, self-examination. . . . The reader does not read for the subject, the ideas, but to be in touch (or such is the illusion) with the writing self.” Despite the fact that certain elements of Colonizer, including the apparent omniscience of the narrative voice, suggest objectivity—and indeed have contributed to its classification as “the least essayistic” of the anticolonial essays—the numerous ways that Colonizer emblematizes the very nature of the essay in fact contribute to a text that both produces and is imbued with subjectivity.
When Lukács wrote that the essay “can calmly and proudly set its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness,” he could have been speaking of *Colonizer*. Eschewing data in favor of the anecdotal, Memmi weaves a textual fabric shot through with “intrusions” of a dialogical nature. In describing the manner in which even the most courteous and well-intentioned colonizer is capable of turning into “a vociferous monster,” the author makes one of a number of appearances in the text as an interlocutor to extratextual voices: “The most absurd accusations are directed toward the colonized. An old physician told me in confidence, with a mixture of surliness and solemnity, that the ‘colonized do not know how to breathe’; a professor explained to me pedantically that ‘the people here don’t know how to walk; they make tiny steps which don’t get them ahead.’ Hence, that impression of stamping feet which seems characteristic of streets in the colony.” The use of deictic markers inserts the author into the discourse, and the sudden shift to first-person narration indicates a personal, anecdotal illustration of the issue at hand, thus supporting a “particularist” reading of *Colonizer* or an interpretation that locates the roots of the narrative in the author and his lived experience. In *Colonizer*, the slippage between first- and third-person narration, or the author’s insertion of himself into the text, has been understood as participating in a larger autobiographical project at the heart of Memmi’s oeuvre: “the function of this discourse . . . appears, on one hand, to be a manner of re-establishing the narrative autobiographical thread that maintains the unity of the work, and, on the other hand, it seems to represent the author’s desire to use his own accounts of his lived experience to remind the reader of his presence.” While this interpretation is plausible, it nonetheless places the intrusion of the authorial “I” in the service of its own autobiographical reading of Memmi’s oeuvre. Alternatively, the slippage between heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narration may also be read as a destabilizing factor within the textual economy of *Colonizer*. While it is true
that the insertion of an autodiegetic discourse reminds the reader of the author’s presence, it also undermines any notion of steadfast authorial neutrality. The author’s identity as “neither, nor”—as representing no one—is thus called into question.

In this way, the author of Colonizer frequently becomes the interlocutor of characters who seemingly emerge unannounced from within the text. While such use of “citation” would typically add authenticity to the work (and also echo the fragmentary, patchwork nature of the essay), this slippage in narration actually destabilizes a reading of the authorial voice as objective or omniscient. Although the passage cited above is not the first instance of the deictic marker “me” in the text, it is one of the most significant insofar as it places the authorial “I” in direct relation with the colonizer. Rather than a distant judge, the author emerges in these moments as an active participant in a dialogue between colonizer and colonized; the fact that he appears to be taken into confidence by the colonizer further underscores the ambiguity of his position.

Not all instances of authorial intrusion are presented with such impartiality, however. In the aforementioned examples involving the doctor and the professor, the author does not comment on the speakers or on their enunciation. His disagreement with the information or opinions put forth is transmitted through irony rather than through direct rebuttal; although the author appears to faithfully reproduce statements made by the professor and the doctor, the reader can deduce from adjectives such as “pedantically” or descriptive phrases like “with a mixture of surliness and solemnity” that the author is not disposed to share their opinions. Furthermore, in saying nothing the author in fact says quite a bit: Memmi’s refusal to provide an authorial gloss on the nature of the anecdotes themselves (that the colonized are incapable of mastering tasks like breathing or walking) suggests that such statements are incompatible with rational argument.

Silence, however, is not the only tactic in Memmi’s quiver, and in certain cases the authorial intrusion is accompanied by com-
mentary. Describing the difficulties faced by “the benevolent colonizer,” Memmi outlines why the colonist is unable to refuse the situation in which he finds himself: the only option available to him would be to identify with the colonized, and this, as Memmi reveals, is impossible: “One simply cannot live . . . to an extent removed from one’s natural sphere.” To survive, one must re-create the world of one’s childhood, of the familiar. And after a time, even the benevolent colonizer must recognize the “stupidity of the enterprise”: “the colonizer can only reject being identified in any way with the colonized. ‘Why not wear a tarboosh in Arab countries and dye your face black in Negro countries?’ an irritated teacher once asked me. It is not immaterial to add that the teacher was a communist.”73 As in the previous example, the deictic “me” signals a change in narration; however, in this instance, the reader is offered information beyond that of the interlocutor’s profession—a notion of his political affiliation is put forth and left for the reader to interpret. As is the case with irony, this particular litotes—“it is not immaterial”—requires the reader to interpret the author’s intention. Knowing that Memmi had become disillusioned with the Communist Party and its ideology inflects the reader’s interpretation of the reference. Not only, then, is it “not immaterial” that the teacher was a communist; it is also essential to Memmi’s analysis of the teacher’s reductive vision of the colonized.

Having established that the essay speaks in a subjective voice and is not a neutral, objective document, it is possible to unpack the irony in particular passages, which, in turn, allows us to understand irony’s function as an authorial strategy. In the second section of “Portrait of the Colonized,” titled “Situations of the Colonized,” Memmi proceeds with a demonstration of the manner in which prejudices against the colonized are put into practice on a daily basis:

Since the colonized is presumed a thief, he must in fact be guarded against (being suspect by definition, why should he
not be guilty?). Some laundry was stolen (a frequent incident in these sunny lands, where laundry dries in the open air and mocks those who are naked), and who but the first colonized seen in that vicinity can be guilty? Since it may be he, they go to his home and take him to the police station. “Some injustice!” retorts the colonizer. “One time out of two, we hit it right. And, in any case, the thief is a colonized; if we don’t find him in the first hut, he’ll be in the second one.”

This anecdote of colonial prejudice is presented in direct speech, in a voice that appears to believe the cause-and-effect relationships of the events it describes, and yet the passage is suffused with irony. Declarative sentences are undermined by the use of italics, suggesting the absurdity of the fact that presumption (“presumed,” “may be”) passes for habeas corpus. Furthermore, the parenthetical remarks indicating that the colonized is “suspect by definition” imply that there may be, in fact, no guilty party. An alternative explanation remains unexamined, namely, that laundry dries out in the open and that therefore the winds are also capable of “stealing” clothing that is insufficiently tethered to its lines. If, in the first part of this citation, the irony is straightforward (the implied meaning is clearly not identical to the superficial meaning), the second portion offers a slightly subtler layer of irony. Direct discourse here has the effect of ventriloquizing the earnest colonizer who does not hesitate to appropriate the language of the colonized: the original French text uses the Arabic word gourbi (rendered as “hut” in the English), a term that carries pejorative connotations of “slum” or “squalor.” While the colonizer also uses irony to suggest that the injustice done is not one at all, the direct citation points up the prejudice inherent in his response to the situation.

We find another instance of irony at the end of the “Portrait of the Colonizer.” The final section describes “The Colonizer Who Accepts,” a metropolitan subject imbued with a “Nero complex” who must, through a series of psychological maneuvers, absolve
himself of all guilt with respect to the colonial situation. To do so, he must convince himself of his mission or, in Memmi’s words, perform “auto-absolution”: “Custodian of the values of civilization and history, he accomplishes a mission; he has the immense merit of bringing light to the colonized’s ignominious darkness. The fact that this role brings him privileges and respect is only justice; colonization is legitimate in every sense and with all its consequences. . . . The colonized could only be grateful to him for softening what is coming to him.” Once again, the play of superficial and implied meaning is at work in the authorial voice. Ostensibly neutral in tone, a third-person narrator describes the process by which the colonizer absolves himself of guilt; however, the knowledge that The Colonizer and the Colonized is not a pro-colonial tract modifies the way we read these lines and in particular our interpretation of the use of italics. Rather than stress the truth of the matter, in this instance the italics call attention to the preposterous nature of the situation, and the emphasis on words like legitimate and grateful destabilizes and even reverses their denotative meaning. While no one would suppose that Memmi actually means that colonization is legitimate and that the colonizer is to be grateful, we can surmise that the colonizer might think so. The irony of the text, then, is couched within its polyphony.

In another example from the first section of “Portrait of the Colonizer,” Memmi describes the colonizer’s surprise at finding the colony filled with indigenous people: “He knew, of course, that the colony was not peopled exclusively by colonists or colonizers. He even had some idea of the colonized from his childhood books; he had seen a documentary movie on some of their customs, preferably chosen to show their peculiarity.” Here again, irony is transmitted through the use of italics that emphasize the instability of the term in question, and terms such as “of course” and “even” further translate a reversal of meaning. If colonial knowledge is turned on its head from the beginning of the passage—the emphasis of the italics suggesting that the colonizer in fact knew nothing
at all—by the end of the anecdote it is revealed that the knowledge in question is nothing short of orientalist, grounded in books and movies ostensibly produced by Europeans to impart a certain view of the “other.” The very notion that one could hope to “know” the colony through children’s books or exoticizing documentaries implies a naiveté that clearly does not belong to the authorial voice.

Another factor destabilizing the authorial voice in the text is the creation of dialogic intrusions. Similar to those passages where the insertion of a deictic marker nods to an authorial presence, here the use of direct discourse stages an explicit exchange between the author and an imagined interlocutor. For example, in refuting the contention that colonization was responsible for Tunisia’s transformation from a backward, traditional society to a modern nation, Memmi points out that numerous other countries have made similar transitions without the assistance of colonization:

Other small countries have transformed themselves greatly without being colonized. Thus a number of countries of Central Europe. . . . But one listener has been smiling skeptically.

“Yes, but it isn’t the same thing.”

“Why not? You mean, don’t you, that those countries are populated by Europeans?”

“Well—yes!”

“There you are, sir! You are just simply a racist.”

“Our listener,” who will never, in the space of the text, be unmasked, clearly occupies a dialogic space opposed to that of Memmi. Because French prose often uses a rhetorical first-person plural (nous) to represent a single author, the use of the possessive “our” can also be read as an authorial intrusion. Playing the devil’s advocate—or perhaps not playing at all—“our” interlocutor is brought forth to question the text; rather than point up the holes in the author’s logic, however, the interlocutor reveals, through his commentary, a racial bias that undermines the substantive weight of his argument.
In addition to the dialogic intrusions in the above-mentioned examples, Memmi also deploys colonial stereotypes of the colonized to ironic effect. Some of these stereotypes are mobilized in the first section of “Portrait of the Colonized,” entitled “Mythical Portrait of the Colonized,” which begins: “Just as the bourgeoisie proposes an image of the proletariat, the existence of the colonizer requires that an image of the colonized be suggested.” Memmi then goes on to reproduce this mythical portrait, which is in fact a creation of the colonizer. Among the characteristics attributed to the colonized is laziness, a trait in turn used to justify the low salaries paid to indigenous workers: “Nothing can describe well enough the extraordinary deficiency of the colonized. He becomes lyrical about it, in a negative way. The colonized doesn’t let grass grow under his feet, but a tree, and what a tree! A eucalyptus, an American centenarian oak! A tree? No, a forest!” Memmi’s representation of the colonial stereotype of the colonized as lazy is, of course, ironic and underscored by the use of hyperbole. While the implied meaning of the enunciation, as spoken by the colonizer (depicted here in free indirect discourse), is identical to the superficial meaning, when the reader accounts for the presence of Memmi, standing behind the speaker and ventriloquizing his voice, the irony becomes clear.

This representation of the colonizer’s stereotypes of the colonized serves a broader function of critiquing and undermining the role of stereotype in discourse produced by the colonizer. Described by Homi Bhabha as the “major discursive strategy” of colonial discourse, the stereotype vacillates “between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.” By ironically ventriloquizing the voice of the colonizer and “anxiously repeating” his stereotypes, Memmi not only undoes the work of the stereotype by revealing its absurdity but creates in turn a stereotype of the colonizer, effectively turning the colonizer’s weapons against him. This is evident in his description of the benevolent colonizer’s attempt to assimilate into the society
of the colony and his consequent discovery of the impossibility of
the maneuver:

The little strains of daily life will support him in his deci-
sive discovery more than great intellectual convulsions will. Having
first eaten couscous out of curiosity, he now tastes it from
time to time out of politeness and finds that “it’s filling,
it’s degrading, and it’s not nourishing.” It is “torture by suf-
ocation,” he says humorously. Or, if he does like couscous,
he cannot stand that “fairground music” which seizes and
deafens him each time he passes a café. “Why so loud? How
can they hear each other?” He is tortured by that odor of old
mutton fat which stinks up many of the houses.82

While the above passage clearly mobilizes many existing stereo-
types regarding the manners and culture of the colonized (loud
music, strange foods, odd smells), it does so while stereotypering
the colonizer, whose sensitive ears and tender stomach make his
participation in the daily life of the colony difficult. For every colo-
nized who eats couscous, there is a colonizer complaining of the
heaviness of the dish. By placing a mirror up to the colonizer’s
stereotypes of the colonized, in effect stereotypering the stereotyper,
Memmi succeeds in undoing this central figure of colonial dis-
course.83

A reading of discursive and rhetorical devices used to deploy
irony such as litotes, dialogical intrusions, and stereotype—ele-
ments that are generally “hidden from the reader’s first glance”—
makes it clear that, beyond the fact that Colonizer belongs to a
genre celebrated for its subjectivity (and as a form that in fact
allows for the constitution of subjectivity), rhetorical strategies
also contribute to its subjective nature. Authorial intrusions of
various types and in various guises disturb the otherwise smooth,
heterodiegetic surface of Colonizer, creating within the text a dia-
logic space of subjective emergence that nonetheless defies any
claim to a unitary subjective identity. This destabilizes the notion

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of *Colonizer* as an objective depiction of the colonial situation, or as a balanced account written by an “outsider,” while simultaneously projecting an enigmatic or hybrid authorial identity. In turn, this instability throws into question a monolithic reading of anti-colonial discourse. Any discourse produced by a text, however, is necessarily in dialogue with its paratextual apparatus, and in what follows I examine the role of *Colonizer’s* paratext in informing the reception and interpretation of the essay.

**Reading(s of) The Colonizer and the Colonized:**

**Paratextuality as Metatextuality**

In its official English-language translation, what might have logically become “Portrait of the Colonized Preceded by the Portrait of the Colonizer” was instead baptized with a title of significantly greater verbal economy. This titular revision stands in contrast to many other translations of Memmi’s seminal essay, which, by virtue of their literal approach, retained the flavor of the original. Perhaps as a result of the brevity of the English title, perhaps for reasons intrinsic to the situation it describes, “the colonizer and the colonized” has become something of a catchphrase or shorthand. Not unlike Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author,” whose title has come to represent a noetic economy for antiauthorial hermeneutics (see chapter 1), the formulation “the colonizer and the colonized” has emerged as an abbreviated code for the imbricated and dialectical nature of the relationship between the two protagonists of the colonial situation. A reading of the change in title, from the original French to the English translation, brings several significant details into relief. The elimination of the key term *portrait* in the English version has the perhaps undesired effect of abandoning the genre of portraiture as a crucial element of the work’s title. In addition to removing the text’s generic marker, Howard Greenfeld’s translation places “the colonizer” before “the colonized,” thus inverting the syntax of the original title. Whereas in the original French, the “portrait of the colonizer” is grammati-
cally subordinated to the “portrait of the colonized,” in the English translation the two terms are coordinated. And while the text of the “portrait of the colonized” follows that of “the portrait of the colonizer,” its syntactical precedence in the title creates a framing structure for the essay: the “portrait of the colonized,” both nominally and structurally, brackets the entire work, allowing the “colonized” to have both the first and the last word.

This reading of what might be considered a detail in the trajectory of Colonizer as it traveled the world nonetheless serves to focus our attention on the relationship between a text and its paratext—doubly embodied, in this case, by the work’s title and its translation. In his study of paratext in francophone postcolonial literature, Richard Watts devotes a chapter to tracing the changes over time in Sartre’s allographic prefaces to texts written by third world intellectuals. Different from the autographic preface (written by the author of the work), the allographic preface (written by someone other than the author of the work) functions as a recommendation or a guarantee of quality. As Watts notes, a preface by a known intellectual such as Sartre lent gravitas to the text it accompanied, a notion Memmi hints at obliquely, in describing Colonizer’s reception: “in the end, with Sartre’s preface as ballast, the book garnered the public’s accolades in subsequent editions.”

Watts contends that a study of allographic prefaces to third world texts makes it possible to chart a shift—from the colonial to the postcolonial era—in the prefacers’ attitudes toward the objects of their patronage: “The monstrous paratextual prosthesis of the colonial years, in which nearly every text appeared with an explanatory, compensatory preface, suggests that the textual body is deemed incomplete by the publisher, that it is lacking in integrity. . . . Decolonized literature seems to want to project a clean break with the metropolitan literary institution; it wants to walk, as it were, on its own, without the help of a prosthetic paratext.” Watts’s hypothesis is borne out by his reading of the evolution in Sartre’s prefatorial discourse from “Black Orpheus”
From Colonizer and Colonized (1948) to the preface to The Wretched of the Earth (1961), whereby the former appears to “compensate” for ostensible gaps in the text it accompanies and the latter is at pains to modulate its admiration. Although “Black Orpheus” is often considered a canonical text for postcolonial studies, the preface has had its share of detractors, most notably V. Y. Mudimbé, who wrote of the preface, “[Senghor] asked for a cloak to celebrate négritude; he was given a shroud,”91 and Fanon, who in Black Skin, White Masks accused Sartre of destroying “black zeal.”92 Watts concurs that “Black Orpheus” “constitutes a betrayal,” as it does not perform the task of promoting the work in question.93 Indeed, in declaring the end of négritude in favor of universalism, Sartre’s long preface—over thirty pages (which stands in striking contrast to Senghor’s two-page preface)—appears to hijack the text it proposes to recommend. By 1961, however, the story is quite different: in his preface to The Wretched of the Earth, Sartre appears unwilling to assert his authorial influence over the text, claiming, “This book had certainly no need for a preface” and thus nearly writing himself out of a role.94 The “economy of patronage,” so evident in “Black Orpheus,” has lost its authority and ceased to function.95

But what of the preface to The Colonizer and the Colonized, which falls chronologically in between Sartre’s authoritarian preface to Senghor’s Anthologie and his laissez-faire preface to The Wretched of the Earth? What is Sartre’s authorial stance with respect to Memmi’s essay, and how does it fit on the continuum from Senghor to Fanon? In the other two prefaces, Sartre establishes himself as mediator, a translator of culture and experience, between the third world text and its European readership. As we have already seen, in “Black Orpheus” he warns his European addressee that the poems contained within the anthology “have not been written for us,” and states that his objective is to explain to his readers “that which black men know already.”96 A similar positioning can be found in the preface to Wretched, as Sartre implies that the addressee of the primary essay is not a European reader:
“What does Fanon care if you read or don’t read his book? It is for his brothers he denounces our old box of mischief, positive we don’t have anything else up our sleeve.” Later, near the end of the preface, in a phrase that also functions as an abdication of authority, Sartre will make his own supplemental status explicit: “This book had certainly no need for a preface. Especially as it is not addressed to us. I have written one, however, to carry the dialectic through to its conclusion.” Watts reads this self-abnegation as Sartre’s “preoccupation with the idea of his own irrelevance and the superfluity of his patronage.” Sartre’s declaration, however, may well suggest a certain false modesty; after all, it is precisely because the book does not ostensibly address a European readership that a preface would be not only helpful but essential. Indeed, I would suggest that because of his contention that the text is not intended for Europeans, Sartre makes a virtuosic display of translating it for his readership—the putative “us” to whom his text is addressed.

With respect to Memmi’s Colonizer, Sartre’s discourse of mediation is markedly different. Contrary to the prefaces penned for Senghor’s Anthologie and Fanon’s Wretched, the preface to Colonizer presents the essay as a work that is easily accessible to a European readership: “Only the Southerner is competent to discuss slavery, because he alone knows the Negro; the puritanical and abstract Northerners know man only as an entity. . . . The newspapers [from the colonies] tell us that the colonizer alone is qualified to speak of the colony. The rest of us, who live in the mother country, do not have his experience, so we are to view the burning land of Africa through his eyes; otherwise, all we will see is fire. For those intimidated by this blackmail, I recommend the reading of The Colonizer and the Colonized.” Unlike the other two works, which, according to their Sartrean prefaces, were never intended for a European readership (although the facts of this assertion are certainly debatable), Colonizer is announced as a kind of “recommended reading” for the timorous Frenchman interested in the
colonial situation but filled with anxiety at the idea that his status as an outsider might prohibit him from acquiring knowledge. Following this logic, it would seem that it was Colonizer, rather than Wretched, that had “no need for a preface.” Moreover, rather than a mediation between cultures and systems of thought, the Sartrean preface to Colonizer is a textual space within which its author rehearses his own arguments with respect to the colonial situation—arguments previously put forth and developed in “Le colonialisme est un système.” Whereas the other two prefaches were initially conceived as such, the preface to Colonizer was first published as a book review in Les Temps modernes. At a mere six pages long, the preface is also significantly shorter than Sartre’s other allographic prefaches. From review to preface, it is worth noting that not a single line of text was altered; perhaps this first iteration as a review rather than as a preface explains in part the attitude of the text, for instead of glossing and commenting on the main essay—as he did extensively in his other two prefaches—Sartre uses the preface to critique certain aspects of Colonizer, a feat he accomplishes by setting forth his version of the “facts.”

Immediately following his qualification of Colonizer as “sober and clear” and as a passionate geometry, Sartre begins a two-page admonishment: “This is doubtless the reason Memmi might be reproached for his seeming idealism; in fact he tells all. But one can haggle with him about his method.” And haggle Sartre does. His critique of Memmi—which takes the form of an exposition of his own arguments against colonization—is based on three points. First, whereas Sartre views racism as implicit in the system of colonialism that creates benefits for the colonizer to the detriment of the colonized, for Memmi, racism is located within individuals and is mobilized by the colonizer in order to justify the colonial enterprise and his place within it. Second, Sartre’s text is invested with Marxist language and emphasizes the economic aspect of colonization: “the average income of the Algerian Frenchman [is] ten times that of the Algerian Moslem. That is the source of the tension.”
While Memmi does engage the question of the relationship between economics and colonization (“the best possible definition of a colony: a place where one earns more and spends less”), he views the economic rationale as superficial and attempts to push beyond it to discover individual psychological factors. Finally Sartre insists on the notion of colonialism as a “system,” whereas for Memmi it is a “situation”: “The whole difference between us arises perhaps because he sees a situation where I see a system.”

This comment, along with the general tone of the preface and Sartre’s insistence on the economic factors of the colonial system, startled Memmi, who responded in an article published at the end of 1957 in which he defended the notion of colonialism as a situation and reiterated his position regarding the economic basis of the colonial enterprise.

Compared with Sartre’s comments on Senghor and the négritude poems in “Black Orpheus,” and on Fanon and his text in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, in the preface to Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* there is a striking absence of both Memmi and his essay. Whereas the preface to *Wretched* traces and comments on Fanon’s position in a stylized prose that mirrors the urgency of Fanon’s, the preface to *Colonizer* mentions Memmi only four times and contains almost no analysis of the work itself. Indeed, when Sartre does speak of Memmi’s method, the subtext is slightly pejorative: “starting with human intentions and felt relationships, [Memmi] guarantees the genuineness of his experience. He suffered first in his relations with others and in his relations with himself; he encountered the objective structure in thoroughly studying the contradiction that was rending him; and he delivers structure and contradiction up to us just as they are, raw and still permeated with his subjectivity.” This passage, the longest one of the preface to describe both Memmi and the work in question, has the effect of simplifying the processes involved in the genesis of the essay. It is as if *Colonizer* itself were a simple psycho-biography whose result, “penetrated with [Memmi’s] sub-
jectivity,” was something other than the process of careful phenomenological analysis, of introspection but also observation of a particular situation and its intricacies. Moreover, having moved from a description of the essay as “sober, clear, and calmly objective” to one that highlights the presence of the author’s subjectivity, Sartre here seems to be caught in the same trap that has ensnared so many readers and critics: unable to decide whether the essay is particularist or universalist in its import, whether it is objectively neutral or passionately engaged, and unwilling to admit that the text is resolutely both.

The role of Sartre’s text is further complicated by consideration of additional layers of paratext such as later prefaces by other authors and various forms of allographic intervention such as interviews, reviews, and afterwords. These forms of paratext are of particular interest here insofar as they comment not only on Colonizer but also on Sartre’s preface—thus reinforcing the notion of Sartre’s text as a supplement that has become part and parcel of the original corpus. In her afterword to the 1991 English edition of Colonizer, Susan Gilson Miller takes pains to introduce Memmi, tracing his career and establishing his significance; nevertheless, of the four pages devoted to commentary on Colonizer, two are devoted to glossing Sartre’s preface. Miller writes: “Yet Sartre’s argument has its own poignancy, for he speaks with the voice of the disappointed French liberal, nauseated by the actions of the French army in Algeria, with its tactics of torture, its brutish ‘rat-hunts’ in which humans were the prey. His main concern is his fellow countrymen, who silently collaborate in colonial wars. Memmi, too, talks of this constituency, but it is Sartre, the cult figure of the French left, who drives home the point that colonial wars are undermining the fiber of the nation.”108 Miller’s observations concerning the function of Sartre’s preface suggest that his text actually completes Colonizer by providing a missing sketch: that of the “disappointed French liberal.” Certainly, however, in choosing to focus on the particular dialectic of colonizer and colonized, Memmi
never intended to posit the disappointed French liberal as one of his objects of study. Miller’s sense that the Sartrean preface plugs a gap in Colonizer returns us to Watts’s notion of the Western intellectual’s preface as a “monstrous prosthesis” without which the third world text would amount to nothing more than a body with a truncated limb.

If by 1961 and the appearance of The Wretched of the Earth the allographic preface appears to have loosened its grip on the third world text and even begun to suggest its own redundancy, in 1957 the Sartrean preface remains tethered to a form of authorial patronage more similar to that exercised in “Black Orpheus.” When compared to the prefaces of both Senghor’s and Fanon’s works, however, what is most striking is Sartre’s abdication of the position of interpreter, or mediator, of Memmi’s text. Whereas neither Fanon nor Senghor (in his role as representative of the négritude poets) addressed the colonizer, or the European reader, Sartre seems to imply that Memmi speaks to him directly. In a sense, then, Sartre’s preface to Colonizer amounts to something of an anomaly in this trilogy. Rather than supplement the existing text, adding to it and glossing it for a “new audience,” in the case of Colonizer Sartre’s preface doubles it, creating an additional layer that has become so tightly sutured to the original work as to be inseparable from it. At the same time, however, a close reading of the preface suggests that its relationship to the main text is ambiguous; while Sartre ostensibly intended to provide a recommendation, he appears more interested in advancing his own argument than in supporting and promoting the text in question.

While it is difficult, even impossible, to trace with any certainty the influence a preface may have had on the reception of the text it prefaces—particularly as there is no way to evaluate how a text such as Colonizer might have fared without Sartre’s paratext—it is nonetheless interesting to note that what began as a book review has become Colonizer’s faithful traveling companion. Not only has the preface accompanied all subsequent publications of Colonizer
in French (since 1966 these reprints have also included a new introduction by Memmi), it also appears in nearly all translations of Colonizer. In certain editions, additional prefaces have occasionally been added to localize the essay. Most recently, Nadine Gordimer provided a South African perspective in her preface for the 2003 edition; in 1990 Liam O’Dowd’s extensive preface related Memmi’s categories to the situation in Northern Ireland. Yet Sartre’s text is always maintained. Regardless of how its message may be parsed or interpreted—as a “shroud” or a “continuation of the dialectic”—the longevity of the Sartrean preface certainly conveys the message that its status is not that of the “dangerous supplement” but rather that of an integral component of the work.

**Late Work: Continuity and Discontinuity in Decolonization and the Decolonized**

If the paratext, when it takes the form of a preface, compensates for a perceived lack by providing a crutch that allows the work to advance or a prosthetic limb that permits it to appear whole, it is worth wondering what happens when that supplemental appendage falls away. Published in 2004, nearly fifty years after the publication of The Colonizer and the Colonized, Memmi’s Decolonization and the Decolonized appears to have achieved the kind of plenitude that the 1950s essays either did not embody or were not perceived to embody. Packaged as an independent, stand-alone treatise, Decolonization features only a short autographic presentation that functions as an introduction to the work; no third party has been summoned to offer weight or gravitas in the form of a preface, foreword, or other paratextual genre. Firmly situated in the postcolonial era, Memmi is now the author of both his text and its paratext.

By 2004 Memmi had perhaps acquired sufficient acclaim or importance (in the eyes of the publishing world) to furnish his own ballast: with six novels, two volumes of poetry, three book-length interviews, thirteen book-length essays or collections of
essays, and more than four edited anthologies to his credit, the author no longer required the patronage of a Sartre—or his early twenty-first century equivalent. Furthermore, Memmi himself had taken on the role of prefacer on numerous occasions, providing an introduction to the French translation of James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, as well as prefaces to Christine Peyre’s *Une société anonyme* (1962)—the memoir of a young woman from working-class Paris who goes on to pursue studies in philosophy—and Rachel Samoul’s collection of short stories about Jews in Algeria.¹⁰⁹

In broader terms, the geopolitical conjuncture had also shifted significantly since midcentury, with decolonization now a *de jure* reality in many formerly colonized countries. Yet the postcolonial era has not been synonymous with disenfranchisement and democracy, and it certainly has not brought an end to discrimination, inequality, and cultural conflicts (now most often articulated between the global “north and south” or the “developed” world and “developing” worlds).

Writing from a vantage point on the cusp of the twenty-first century, Memmi clearly has come to occupy a different subjective space endowed with new forms of cultural capital. In light of these changes, the absence of a paratextual apparatus of the type examined with respect to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* is of interest, for it suggests that *Decolonization and the Decolonized* may epitomize a formerly colonized author’s rise to complete authorial autonomy. A reminder from Watts is germane here: “Decolonized literature seems to want to project a clean break with the metropolitan literary institution; it wants to walk, as it were, on its own, without the help of a prosthetic paratext.”¹¹⁰ While the possibility of a “clean break” with metropolitan literary institutions seems both unlikely and perhaps undesirable—all of Memmi’s books have been published by major French presses; both *Colonizer* and *Decolonization* were issued by Gallimard—it is clear that the politics of patronage so essential in 1950s anticolonial discourse had ceased to exert its influence, at least in certain
contexts, by the time Memmi wrote the later essay. In light of this newfound authorial capital, the relationship between Memmi’s *Decolonized* and his earlier *Colonizer* may be read as one of diachronic paratextuality.

Although *Decolonization* is not directly billed as a sequel, Memmi does refer to the 2004 essay as a continuation, “to a certain extent,” of the 1957 text. Subsequently, the continuity of genre, title, and terminology captured in its evolution over time (the genesis from colonized to decolonized) allows the 2004 essay to function as an epilogue to *Colonizer*. Moreover, the later essay responds, in a structure and style similar to that of the earlier essay, to a (purportedly) analogous set of social, political, and cultural phenomena. If, however, the 2004 essay continues and builds on an established tradition, it also diverges from and is disruptive of that same tradition. While a comparison of the two makes it evident that *Decolonization* implicitly comments upon *Colonizer*, a contrapuntal reading also lays bare a distinct shift in authorial attitude toward the textual object at hand.

One of the most notable differences between the 1957 and 2004 essays derives from Memmi’s adoption of statistical data. Whereas *Colonizer* has been cited as a “factual” account of the colonial situation despite its reliance on anecdote rather than statistics, *Decolonization* indeed employs figures, dates, and references to actual geopolitical situations. Hence in describing what he calls the current state of “permanent crisis,” Memmi reinforces his argument quite differently than in 1957. Rather than put forth anecdotes about a situation he had either lived or witnessed firsthand, in *Decolonization* his “archive” is the entire globe: he wonders why in oil-rich countries like Venezuela and Nigeria, “at least 20 percent of the population live below the threshold of poverty,” or why in North Korea, “a third of the population survives only through food support from around the world,” or how a so-called developing country like Saudi Arabia has seen its “per capita income decrease 60 percent since 1980.”
Also significant to this display of geopolitical statistics, and beyond the author’s choice to ground his new study in quantifiable material realities, is the decision to eliminate the author’s particular lived experience as a basis for analysis. In spite of this, in his introduction to *Decolonization*, Memmi insists that both “portraits” are built on the same foundation, and both deploy a methodology of “le vécu,” or lived experience: “As before, I have relied on the Arab-Muslim model or, more specifically, the Maghreb. Simply because it is the region I know best, having been born and raised there, and having retained, in spite of the current difficulties, strong affiliations and friendships.” And yet one cannot help but feel a degree of discomfort with this assertion, for not only do the references to multiple global conflicts in *Decolonization* and its use of statistics create a radically different tone from that of *Colonizer*, but Memmi’s claim that both texts are based on the same model also rings false. The notion that “once again” the Arab-Muslim milieu has furnished the model for his reflection is contradicted by the fact that the 1957 text was deeply inflected by Memmi’s experience as a colonized Jew in a Muslim state: “But I was not a Moslem. In a country where so many groups, each jealous of its own physiognomy, lived side by side, this was of considerable importance.” And while in *Decolonization*, the reader does catch a glimpse of the old mantra of self-identification and belonging (“having been born and grown up in the Maghreb”), the absence of any direct reference to the complexity of Memmi’s multiple belongings is striking and casts a certain ambiguity on his claims of a common foundation for both essays.

Memmi’s homodiegetic presentation reassures the reader that she or he is faced with a text comparable to the author’s previous essay on the colonial situation, and in so doing it performs a similar discourse to that of the first-world patron’s preface, guaranteeing the quality and authenticity of the work, offering an imprimatur; however, the remainder of the essay—indeed, its bulk—is narrated in the third person with virtually none of the
narrative slippage, authorial intrusions, or impassioned rhetorical tactics observed in the 1957 essay. Although in *Colonizer* the subject of writing and the writing subject are not precisely one and the same, significant points of contact between the two allow for an understanding of their convergence; their sympathies and antipathies embed themselves throughout the text. In *Decolonization*, conversely, the writing subject stages a virtual disappearing act: the authorial voice becomes omniscient to an extent never truly applicable to the 1957 essay in the way some of its commentators claimed. This absence can be located as early in the textual encounter as the title; the portrait presented is one of the “decolonized Arab Muslim”—a frame into which Memmi, as an Arab Jew, quite obviously does not fit.

It appears that Memmi, having at one point stated that both portraits—of colonizer and colonized—were in part self-portraits, has now entirely erased himself from the canvas. The preface opens with a near-abdication of authorial interest: “Rarely have I had so little desire to write a book.” Disappeared also is the notion of writing as catharsis, as “working through” in order to make sense of a given situation. In *Colonizer* the self (and indeed, Memmi himself) appeared to belong to a larger sociopolitical matrix, and the individual functioned as a synecdoche for the world order: “I am one of those,” he wrote in the conclusion, “who believe that to find a new order of things with Europe means putting new order in oneself.” In *Decolonization*, however, the author stands resolutely separated from the object of his description. This distancing is perhaps most manifest at the end of the essay, when Memmi articulates a clear objective: “More than a precautionary compassion is needed if we are to help decolonized peoples; we must also acknowledge and speak the truth to them, because we feel they are worthy of hearing it. . . . This seemed to me the best way of assisting those who were once colonized.” The new order of the self clearly has no place in *Decolonization*, in which the particular type of decolonized subject described falls outside of the author’s limits.
of self-definition. The decolonized (“them,” “they”) are resolutely and grammatically distanced from the “we” (a first-person plural including Memmi).

In writing himself out of the story of the decolonized, however, Memmi has undoubtedly, and ironically, created an absence that is as revelatory and suggestive as his “presence” in Colonizer of 1957. Of course, it is true that Memmi’s lived experience has very little in common with the decolonized subjects he describes in the 2004 essay (“The New Citizen” and “The Immigrant”), a fact that may be more surprising in light of the English title, which is somewhat misleading in its promise of a study of “decolonization and the decolonized,” and in its omission of the subtitle that specifies a particular type of decolonized individual. The French title’s “Portrait of the Decolonized (Arab-Muslim and a Few Others),” with its omission of references to the process of decolonization and its implications of contemporaneity, avoids confusion with the heyday of the anticolonial movement. Yet within these seemingly minor paratextual elements lies the very deep change in subject position that Memmi appears to have undergone in the postcolonial era—a period during which he became entrenched in his life as a Parisian intellectual and professor, traveling only rarely to Tunisia.120 As he confided in a recent interview: “You know, the truth is that when I left Tunisia, after some years of hesitation, I became a Western writer. I’m more concerned now with the fate of the world than with the specific fate of North Africa or Tunisia.”121

Such statements necessarily give rise to larger questions of identity and its construction: is it possible for a third world writer to become a French writer (as a function, presumably, of time spent in France)? Are changes in one’s concerns or preoccupations—from the local to the global, to gloss Memmi’s words—sufficient to evince such a radical change in identity? Can changes in subjective identity be made visible, and if not, is it possible to negotiate a truce between internal sentiments and external perceptions? Conventional wisdom holds that a leopard cannot change its
spots—meaning, of course, that fundamental changes in nature are impossible—yet here Memmi declares unproblematically that he has done just that, affording himself a new subject position from which to both view and write the world around him.

In addition to provoking fascinating, if unanswerable, meta-level questions, Memmi’s articulation of his change in (authorial) identity—nothing less than a construction of a new self—goes some way toward explaining the palpable change in tone from *The Colonizer and the Colonized* to the 2004 essay. If taking Memmi’s words at face value is both insufficient and critically unsatisfying, it is nonetheless possible to locate within *Decolonization and the Decolonized*—regardless of whether Memmi is, or believes he has become, a French writer—a discourse tantamount to the performance of an essentializing and essentialist Frenchness. This is manifest, on the one hand, in the distance Memmi creates between himself and his textual objects, and while this distancing may in part be the result of an implicit re-creation of the politics of patronage seen in the relationships between Sartre’s preface and Memmi’s *Colonizer*, it reveals itself in the production of a patronizing effect. Having acceded to full authority over his text, Memmi’s discourse appears at times indulgent, particularly in statements that declare the decolonized “worthy of hearing the truth” or that laud his own work of establishing “an accurate assessment” as the best way of “assisting those who were once colonized.”

On the other hand, and of particular relevance to the second half of the essay, titled “The Immigrant” and primarily concerned with issues of immigrant identity and the turn to fundamentalism, is Memmi’s performance of unflinching faith in French universalism and secularism. Indeed, it is with the zeal of the convert that he attacks, for example, the position of young Muslim women born in France who opt to don the veil: “Their arguments, some
weak, some clever, often had to do with freedom. . . . It is a foolish argument. For they fail to see that they are acting against their own interests in rejecting the laws that freed them in favor of the dogmas that enslaved them. In the name of a poorly understood secularism, they demand not to be secular.”123 As an excoriating assessment of the rationale put forth by young women who veil, Memmi’s words, grounded in the conviction of his own “well-interpreted” secularism, fairly pulse with their own totalizing agenda. This firm grip on Enlightenment values, which, it must be said, have by now been roundly critiqued—particularly by postcolonial theory’s deconstruction of Enlightenment essentialism—has unsurprisingly earned Memmi some detractors.124 And while the critics are correct to note a tenor that might pass for paternalistic and to point out the aporias of his thinking, it is once again to Memmi’s performance of a certain essentialist French positioning—his own nec plus ultra of Frenchness—that I draw the reader’s attention. Without wishing to rehearse contemporary French debates on the Islamic headscarf and, more recently, the burqa, it is relevant to point out the convergence between Memmi’s position in Decolonization and the Decolonized and the proponents of state-sponsored secularism: he shares the stage with those who oppose Islamic garb in the name of republican values. More to the point, however, Memmi’s sustained performance of authorial self-fashioning—which we have witnessed both in his fiction and over the span of fifty years of essays—seems to be emblematic of the situation of the postcolonial writer. “Other” by origin and “French” (or, more broadly, metropolitan) by language, culture, and sometimes by adoption, the inherent instability of that subjectivity seems to find its most enduring expression in the performance and production of a variety of authorial positions, all of which tend to generate contradictory discourses.125

Despite the numerous divergences between the 1957 and 2004 essays, the texts share a remarkable and singular commonality. In the aftermath of the publication of The Colonizer and the Colo-
nized, history eventually unfolded to reveal the essay’s foresight—by the end of the 1960s nearly all of Africa’s colonial regimes had been dismantled—thus earning Memmi the moniker “Prophet of Decolonization.”

Even in the short time that has elapsed since the publication of Decolonization and the Colonized, the conjuncture of events has been sufficient to suggest, once again, an uncanny prescience on the part of the author. Certainly, when Decolonization was published in 2004, neither Memmi nor the populations directly affected would have predicted the turn of events that began with Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution and would bloom into a full-fledged Arab Spring, with uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria all following suit to varying degrees of success.

As with The Colonizer and the Colonized, in 2004 Memmi was not right about everything, and although it is too early yet to write the history of the Arab Spring, it is eminently clear that Memmi’s vision of the Arab world, as articulated in the essay, has already been overreached: “The Arab world has still not found, or has not wanted to consider, the transformations that would enable it to adapt to the modern world, which it cannot help but absorb. Rather than examining itself and applying the proper remedies, it looks for the causes of its disability in others.”

Whether or not the regimes under pressure can transform themselves in a manner that would adapt to the modern world remains to be seen; what is clear, however, is that the “Arab street” has already internalized and reinvested numerous modes of modernity in the very forms of its upheaval. While Memmi’s essay did not explicitly foresee the uprisings that would follow only a few years after its publication, one cannot help but note that, for the second time in his long career, he seems to have percipiently inventoried the structural phenomena at the root of an intractable historical situation on the eve of its paroxysm.
Continuations

Albert Memmi in the Post-Francophone World

Today, it is impossible to be a serious student of French literature without having to come to terms with literature composed in the language by Caribbean and North African writers.


To the litany of putative philosophical deaths—of God, man, and the author—we have been summoned to add another: the death of francophonie. The call to unseat this construct, which Albert Memmi professed to have lived spontaneously, “like Monsieur Jourdain wrote prose,” came in the form of “Toward a ‘World-Literature’ in French,” a manifesto published in *Le Monde des livres* in March 2007 and signed by forty-four writers. Rather than perpetuate the futile attempt to suture French-language writers from beyond the hexagon to a *heimatlos* construct—that is, the *utopos* of francophonie—the signatories of the manifesto proposed detaching the French language from its “exclusive pact with the nation,” so that it might encounter no boundaries other than “those of the mind.” Conceived in the wake of a literary prize season in France that saw the prestigious Goncourt, Fémina, and Renaudot Prizes given to works by foreign francophone writers, the text articulated a clear blow to francophonie: “the emergence of a consciously affirmed, transnational world-literature in the French
language, open to the world, signs the death certificate of so-called francophone literature.” Although the manifesto baptizes this new world order with the neologism littérature-monde, its rhetoric of Copernican revolution describes what might well be labeled a post-francophone world in which francophone, as both a term and a concept, has reached the limits of its utility.

The littérature-monde manifesto immediately stirred passions, prompting debate and rebuttal within scholarly circles, institutional francophonie, and the popular press.3 That the notion continues to be a subject of inquiry and polemic, as evidenced by the numerous edited volumes and conferences devoted to the topic, seems to imply that a moment of change is indeed upon us and that research in francophone literature will need to confront, once again, the issue of categorizing and naming its objects of study.4 Given the demonstrated capacity of Memmi’s work to reengage and reshape a number of compelling critical debates—particularly as related to taxonomy and nomenclature in the field of francophone Maghrebi literature—it may be fruitful to reflect on “a world-literature in French” through the prism of Memmi’s thought, particularly his vision of francophonie. How do discourses produced by Memmi’s corpus complicate the notion of a littérature-monde? Can Memmi help us navigate a post-francophone world?

The call for the end of francophonie rings with a note of déjà vu, as the term has long been a target for critics. Erroneously and somewhat ironically, Memmi himself predicted the demise of a certain iteration of francophonie well before the concept had been institutionalized. As early as 1957, in a section of The Colonizer and the Colonized, he intoned a funerary hymn for French literature from the Maghreb, stating that due to a variety of irreconcilable factors, “colonized literature in European languages appears condemned to die young.”5 Yet what had seemed inevitable in the immediate aftermath of Tunisian and Moroccan decolonization and in light of the continuing struggle for Algerian independence—that is, the rise of the Arabic language as part of a larger project
of national self-affirmation—did not come to pass in the manner Memmi had anticipated, and it did not have fatal consequences to francophone literature and culture. In his preface to the 1985 *Anthologie des écrivains francophones du Maghreb*, which brought together under the rubric of francophone the literature produced in French by both Maghrebi and French authors, Memmi recanted the prediction made in 1957: “While I have not ceased to believe that Arabic will find the place it deserves, I was forced to admit that the natural resistance of habit is stronger than logical or sentimental predictions. Not only has French in the Maghreb maintained its importance and its prestige . . . , new writers are also using the language just as naturally as their ancestors did and sometimes even with greater freedom.”

To state that the littérature-monde manifesto and Memmi’s 1985 preface share certain philosophical underpinnings may appear provocative or simply erroneous, given that the former plainly seeks to do away with the concept espoused by the latter. Nonetheless, in spite of what seem to be diametrically opposed interests, it is impossible to ignore a number of similarities between the two texts. In both cases, they describe a literary category that is culturally and geographically diverse yet united by language. The manifesto claims that littérature-monde is an appropriate term because “literatures in French around the world today are demonstrably multiple, diverse, forming a vast ensemble, the ramifications of which link together several continents” and because we bear witness today to “a vast polyphonic ensemble.” Memmi’s preface stakes out similar territory for francophonie, which “today simply means that the French language miraculously brings together a number of writers from all over the world.” Here, the notions of diversity, plurality, and linking can be located implicitly in the expression *bring together*, while both texts use similar wording (“around the world,” “from all over the world”) to gesture to the transnational nature of the grouping in question.
Both the littérature-monde essay and Memmi’s preface are also acutely aware of the specter of colonialism in the constitution of the body of literature they describe. The manifesto states that “the ‘francophone’ concept presents itself as the last avatar of colonialism. What these fall prizes confirm is the inverse notion: that the colonial pact is broken, that language thus liberated has become everyone’s concern.” Although he comes to a radically different conclusion with respect to francophonie, Memmi nonetheless demonstrates in his preface an awareness of the term’s tainted legacy, while suggesting at the same time that such negative connotations have been overcome: “Certain people saw it as a last ruse of colonialism, a way of maintaining, through culture, a weakened political stranglehold. . . . But it is true that an important event has occurred: French, having ceased to be the language of a colonial nation, should no longer raise any particular suspicion.”

Ironically, given its bald rejection of francophonie, the manifesto would appear to have reached the same conclusion as Memmi. In stating that the results of the 2006 literary prize season prove that francophonie is not the “last avatar of colonialism,” but rather that the colonial pact is “broken” and language belongs to everyone, the text of the manifesto in fact implies that the colonial legacy of francophonie has been surpassed. Indeed, “language thus liberated has become everyone’s concern” resonates as a variation on Memmi’s theme (“French, having ceased to be the language of a colonial nation, should no longer raise any particular suspicion”).

Nonetheless, and in spite of these fundamental similarities, it cannot be denied that the two texts differ in several ways. In addition to their ultimate choice of terms, the two texts put forward divergent visions of the metropole as it relates to language. The littérature-monde manifesto clearly seeks to cast francophonie aside because it views the term as bonding formerly colonized French-language writers to the imperial nation: “we’re witnessing the birth of a new constellation, in which language freed from its exclusive pact with the nation, free from every other power hereafter but
the powers of poetry and the imaginary will have no other frontiers but those of the spirit.” Curiously, other than its recognition of francophonie’s possible signification as “a last ruse of colonialism,” Memmi’s preface makes no reference to the French nation. If anything, for the 1985 anthology, francophonie—as a term and concept—creates a pact between a set of French-language writers (both French and native North Africans) and the Maghreb: “All those who, through their use of French and in spite of cultural specificities, participate in a single cultural field and trace the borders of a certain literary space: that of the francophone Maghrebi writer.”10 Paradoxically, the concept of francophonie in Memmi’s preface suggests the possibility of divorcing language from its national referent and thus retaining French as a common denominator while eliminating France.

If we are indeed witnessing a moment where “constellations” are being formed and where soon a “language will have no other frontiers but those of the mind,” it is worth probing the limits of those extant mental boundaries. Given the similarities between littérature-monde as defined in the manifesto and francophonie as defined by Memmi’s preface, does this new term constitute an improvement? Memmi’s work suggests that terms and classifications are only as useful as their appropriateness to the given contexts they propose to describe and that it behooves the critics and arbiters of categories to ensure that terms keep time with historical changes. Notwithstanding this flexibility, Memmi nonetheless remains loyal to a certain degree of terminological pragmatism: his preface makes clear that despite potential associations with colonization, francophonie adequately and elegantly fulfills a necessary function. If we are to accept the death of francophonie as a term of foreclosure due to its associations with an imperial nation and its language, it is nonetheless incumbent upon all readers to think critically about the functionality of littérature-monde as its replacement.
Just as the polysemy of francophone and francophonie has been parsed and deconstructed, so must the multiple meanings and allusions conjured by the term littérature-monde be considered. The formulation is relatively close to littérature du monde (world literature). World literature, however, particularly as it has been practiced as an academic sub-field, tends to refer to works of literature that are not “from here,” which makes it a relative term, dependent on wherever “here” may be. The potential association with world literature, and its tacit center-margin paradigm, would appear to be at cross purposes with the littérature-monde ethos, whereby “the center is henceforth everywhere, at the four corners of the world.”

The writers of the manifesto, however, very carefully formulated a neologism inimical to translation as “world literature in French.” Rather, littérature-monde en français indicates a “literature-world in French.” As such, the term seems to derive from a concept in economics known as an économie-monde, developed by French historian Fernand Braudel and defined as “a slice of the planet that is economically autonomous, essentially self-sufficient, and whose internal links and exchanges afford it an organic unity of sorts.” According to economist David Ormrod, “A world-economy (économie-monde or Weltwirtschaft) should not be confused with the world economy as a whole. It refers rather to a fragment of the world.” Braudel’s definition further explains that “an economy-world always has a pole, a center, represented by a dominant city, a city state in the past, today a capital, by which we mean an economic capital (in the United States, New York, not Washington DC).” An économie-monde, then, is a self-sufficient, self-sustaining, coherent grouping that delimits itself from other groupings and that contains, within itself, a hierarchical structure. Understood as a variation on économie-monde, littérature-monde thus carries with it a set of connotations that may be neither desired nor desirable. While littérature-monde certainly and appropriately retains the transnational flavor of économie-monde, the hermetic
nature of this delimited world and its reliance on a center-periphery structure contradict the desire for the profusion of “centers” and a language without borders that the manifesto hopes to engender.

Thus, like the terms francophone and francophonie, littérature-monde promises to be “semantically tortuous and conceptually hazardous”—albeit more so and for different reasons. From a practical point of view, it is difficult to understand how the term might function outside the context of the manifesto and its passions, when set against the exigencies of the “real” world. Will universities create littérature-monde departments to replace departments of French and Francophone studies? Will the writers themselves, heretofore described by the adjective francophone, be redubbed littérature-mondialistes? And their works? Rebaptized littérature-mondiale? Notwithstanding such issues of nomenclature—which, as discussions of francophone and francophonie have shown, are in no way negligible—does this new appellation solve any of the questions originally posed with regard to francophone literature? Does the term illuminate how this particular authorial status inflects our readings or the texts’ reception? Does littérature-monde escape classifying a literature by virtue of its writers’ difference? Finally, does its nominal detachment from a linguistic marker—given that the littérature-monde in question remains linguistically marked—serve a deeper epistemological function?

Given a paradigm shift where language would be allowed to supplant the nation as a unit of taxonomy, Memmi opted in 1985 to embrace a term that, despite its charged history, could unite rather than divide. Francophone and francophonie, for Memmi, offer the possibility of adequately naming a body of literature; by extension, this allows for the dissemination, study, and theorization of a literary field. In proposing to do away with francophonie, the littérature-monde manifesto effectively attempts to usher in a moment that can only properly be called post-francophone. Yet to call this new reality by the name that most accurately describes
it would be impossible, at least according to the cultural politics of the manifesto, for to articulate this moment of revolution as post-francophone would be to remain faithful to a logic that it desperately wishes to surpass. And, at the same time, we can no more be truly post-francophone than we can be post-language, for notwithstanding the charge that “no one speaks francophone,” as the manifesto itself attests, people still speak and write in French. Rather than attempt to scrub away the very last trace of colonialism from the terminology used to describe the phenomenon of formerly colonized writers writing in French, perhaps we could agree to understand this trace differently and to recognize that the terms francophone and francophonie embody a pragmatics and, by extension, a politics that serve poetics in a way that une littérature-monde en français simply cannot. Perhaps the solution lies not in inventing new terminology but rather in truly breaking down those last existing frontiers, “those of the mind.”
Notes

Introduction


2. See Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy.”

3. I borrow here Umberto Eco’s notion of textual intention: “between the intention of the author . . . and the intention of the interpreter . . . there is a third possibility. There is an intention of the text.” *Interpretation and Over-interpretation*, 25.

4. The *kouttab* were preschools focused on religious education. In Memmi’s case, the formation was Hebraic; however, the term *kouttab* is also used to designate Koranic schools.

5. Application of the Vichy laws began in Tunisia in November 1940; two years later, with the arrival of the German occupying forces, the Jewish community’s administrative committee was dissolved and Tunisian Jews were ordered to participate in forced labor programs. Unlike the Jewish communities of Morocco, Algeria, and even Western Europe, the Tunisian Jewish community was forcibly reorganized into a system with a *Judenrat*, a council of Jews who served as a governing body for the local Jewish community and acted as intermediaries for Nazi dictates (as was the case during the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe). Thus the task of organizing and providing the required number of workers fell to the Jews themselves. See Sabille, *Les juifs de Tunisie sous Vichy et l’occupation*.


7. Memmi specifically cites philosophers François Châtelet and Paul Sebag as valuable interlocutors.

8. “The universality, openness and social mobility—opportunities that only the colonizer could provide at the time—traditionally appeared to the Jews as a bargaining chip for their alienation; as a result such opportunities were for them an object of deep longing.” Dugas, *La littérature judéo-maghrébine*, 28.

10. Memmi has given different reasons for the nearly twenty-year gap between his settling in France and his acquisition of French citizenship. In a 2006 interview with Dennis Pereira-Egan for Radio France internationale (RFI), Memmi stated: “I had decided to request French citizenship but I was told ‘you’ll never get it . . . because your book *Colonizer and Colonized* was damaging to France.’ For three or four years that’s how it went; I had to keep resubmitting dossiers, forms kept getting lost, they put me through all kinds of suffering, but a few well-placed friends in Paris were able to intervene on my behalf and I was finally granted French citizenship.” In a more recent interview, Memmi stated that he waited so many years before applying for French citizenship because he feared upsetting Tunisian friends who viewed his move to Europe as a kind of treason. Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

11. Memmi recounts that Sartre asked him to direct a special issue of *Les Temps modernes* focusing on Tunisia; however, Memmi was quickly disenchanted with the *tm* group. Memmi, *La terre intérieure*, 170. Memmi’s first meeting with Sartre had taken place several years earlier, in 1953, and in 1955 Memmi met Camus, who agreed to preface the new edition of *The Pillar of Salt*.

12. Speaking about his brief collaboration with Sartre, Memmi noted: “I viewed Sartre with both admiration and skepticism. He generously invited me to join the *Temps modernes* editorial board, and I went to several meetings before I realized that Sartre was dangerous, that it was dangerous for a young man such as myself to frequent someone so successful and powerful, and for whom one has such admiration.” Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

13. “*The Scorpion* was not very successful. Readers did not understand what I was trying to do; that discouraged me.” Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

14. Memmi’s definition of racism initially took the form of book-length essay titled *Racism* (2000); it has since been adopted by the *Encyclopédie*
universalis. The concept of heterophobia is developed in the same essay, and in a short piece titled “La peur de l’autre” (Fear of the other) included in the collection Bonheurs (52 semaines) (Paris: Arléa, 1992), 47–49.


16. “The death of the author . . . is inseparable from the massive reaction in France against the resuscitation of the Cartesian cogito in Husserlian phenomenology, it being only as a particularly vigorous form of anti-phenomenologism that French structuralism and post-structuralism can be understood.” Burke, Death and Return, 180–81.

17. Butor, “Individu et groupe dans le roman,” in Répertoire, 2:80. “The novel is the expression of a changing society; it will soon become the expression of a society that is aware of changing.”

18. The question of when the nouveau roman began, however, is open to interpretation, particularly as Natalie Sarraute’s Tropismes, also considered a nouveau roman, was published in 1939.

19. The autobiography that made a return to the literary stage in the 1970s in France did not, however, resemble “traditional” first-person narratives of life stories: “Since the 70s there has been a trend toward autobiography, yet these impromptu autobiographies no longer truly correspond to the canonical criteria of the genre. The effects of the post-structuralist critique of the Self as a central reference and of the referential possibilities of language are still palpable.” Molkou “L’autofiction, un genre nouveau?” 161. Here Molkou refers specifically to Robbe-Grillet’s Ghosts in the Mirror (1985) and Sarraute’s Childhood (1983).


21. This is perhaps best illustrated by the eighteenth century’s fascination with the Molyneux problem, the question of whether a man born blind and then restored to sight would continue to apprehend the world in the same manner. See Paulson, Enlightenment, 5.


23. Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation, 25.

1. Of Authors and Archives

1. “The most important changes in the field of French studies over the past forty years have been the theoretical explosion of the 1960s, the feminist revolution that started in the 1970s, and the recognition of ‘Franco-phone’ literatures.” MacDonald and Suleiman, eds., French Global, x.


4. To name only a few of the theorists who have proposed that the colonized writer’s use of the language of the colonizer may be most usefully construed as an oppositional maneuver that not only transcends any kind of “pure” mimesis but compels a renegotiation or reformulation of the “dominant” cultural idiom. Examples include “writing back” in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Empire Writes Back*; “hybridity” and “mimicry” in Bhabha, *Location of Culture*; and “minor literature” in Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

5. The organizing principle behind the first anthology was based on a concept Memmi had proposed and implemented while working as the culture editor for *L’Action* in Tunis (1955–1956).

6. Memmi historicizes his effort to categorize North African writing in French, noting that “still, the job of situating the works originating in North Africa goes back to the beginning of the century.” This effort would be followed in the 1930s by Audisio and Camus in their founding of the *école d’Alger*, or the Algiers school (also known as the *école nord africaine des lettres*, or the North African school of letters). Memmi, ed., *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d’expression française* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1964), 11.

7. For clarity, anthologies are hereafter referred to by the year of their publication.

8. Charles Bonn has called this third anthology “the first time the academy took note of this young literature.” Bonn, “Le découvreur, le défricheur et le vulgarisateur,” 40.


11. The term *autochthonous*, which I have chosen to translate literally for the sake of clarity, tends to be deployed ambiguously and is sometimes conflated with “indigène” (indigenous). For Richard Watts, *autochthones* refers to “people of French extraction living in the colonies,” whereas *indigène* describes people of Maghrebi extraction, generally born in the colonies. It is important, therefore, to recognize that not all autochthones are created equal. Watts, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur indigène?” 61.
12. It is interesting to note that Memmi avoids the charged and imprecise term *pied-noir*, historically used to designate French European settlers in North Africa.


15. Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 56. “The mechanism is practically constant. The colonial situation manufactures colonialists, just is it manufactures the colonized.”


22. Reclus, *France, Algérie et colonies*, 422–25. Reclus sought to create a category that would englobe certain speakers of French, namely, those with origins outside the hexagon. Unsurprisingly, *Le Littré* of 1883 does not contain an entry for *francophone* or *francophonie*. *Le Trésor de la langue française* (1980) cites 1932 as the first usage of the term *francophone* (“A person who speaks French”), but there is no entry for *francophonie*. The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, however, dates both *francophone* and *francophonie* to the twentieth century. It is also noteworthy that neither word appeared in the *Académie’s* dictionary prior to the ninth and most recent edition, the first volume of which was published in 1992.


24. Reclus points to an increase in the number of extra-metropolitan Francophones as a solution to declining birth rates in France: “it would be good if the francophone world would double or triple while other languages experience an increase in growth. . . . We hope that the elegant language we have inherited will live a long life, in small part thanks to us, in large part thanks to Africa and Canada.” (424–25).

25. “[The term *francophonie*] was used to refer to the territories around the world that had recently come under the influence of French culture, which is a rather euphemistic way of describing the process of colonisation.” Murphy, “De-Centering French Studies,” 166.

26. Reclus, *France*, 425. Other examples include “the Flemish, the Britons, the Basques, the Corsicans, and the Catalanians.” As Emily Apter has pointed out, the French language has long been marked by a resistance to
internal linguistic plurality, and “the story of the history of the language contains a story of progressive monolingualization.” See Apter, “Theorizing Francophonie,” 300.


28. According to the OIF, the status of the French language varies among its members, and having French as the official national language is not a criterion for membership. See the official “Charte de la Francophonie” signed on November 23, 2005, in Antananarivo. Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, accessed July 13, 2011, http://www.francophonie.org/La-Charte-de-la-Francophonie.html. In the case of Albania, for example, the Encyclopédie de la Francophonie cites the relatively high rate of French-language education in secondary schools as a rationale for the nation’s participation in the OIF (see Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, accessed July 13, 2011, http://agora.qc.ca/francophonie.nsf/Dossiers/Albanie).

29. It is difficult to determine the exact moment of the inception of francophone as an academic category; however, it appears to have been used in an academic literary context for the first time in 1973 by G. Tougas. See Les écrivains d’expression française et la France, as noted by Michel Beniamino in La francophonie littéraire, 18. In 1974, the Sorbonne founded the Centre international d’études francophones (CIEF), a research unit within the French and Comparative Literature Department, devoted to the study of francophone literatures.

30. Forsdick and Murphy, “Case for Francophone Postcolonial Studies”: “despite the ‘inclusive’ impulse of many working within Francophone Studies who seek to promote the study of non-metropolitan ‘French’ Cultures, the use of the term ‘Francophone’ has often involved an ‘exclusionary’ gesture, which is used to emphasize ethnic or racial ‘difference’ from a perceived ‘French norm,’ with metropolitan France rigorously excluded from deliberations of Francophone studies.”


33. Germane here is Peter Hitchcock’s observation that the goal of postcolonial politics “is not the production of postcoloniality as being . . . but its ultimate sublation (a stark contrast to Western ontology) as a sign that the colonizer/colonized binary has itself been overreached.” Hitchcock, “The Genre of Postcoloniality,” 299. Dominic Thomas, taking a slightly more institutional view, is also relevant: “Francophone and postcolonial
studies could considerably enhance their validity and authenticity by continuing to insist on the need for a model that is as democratic and inclusive as possible with regard to the various geographic zones in which thinking is generated.” Thomas, “Intersections and Trajectories,” 238.

34. See, for example, Forsdick and Murphy, “Case for Francophone Postcolonial Studies.”

35. Hountondji, “Réponse d’attente,” 28: “I don’t see in the francophone area any delimitation of a special discipline that would correspond to ‘postcolonial studies,’ though the critique or deconstruction of colonial ideology has been developing for a while.” Apter, “Theorizing Francophonie,” 297: “Francophonie names multiple regions marked by the French language rather than a specific nation or theory.”

36. Mishra and Hodge, “What is Post(-)colonialism?” 276. It is also important to note that “postcolonial” criticism or theory stems not only from a consideration of cultural productions of the post-colony, but also from Saidian colonial discourse analysis (which takes Western texts as its objects of study).

37. Huggan, Postcolonial Exotic, 236: “postcolonial criticism has evolved its own formidable definition industry, with little consensus other than that the term, and the literary and cultural field it represents, are inherently conflicted.”

38. For more on the semantics of the hyphen, see Ashcroft’s “On the Hyphen in ‘Post-Colonial.”


40. To cite a few of the most often cited: Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Empire Writes Back; Williams and Chrisman, Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies; Young, Postcolonialism.

41. According to Alec Hargreaves, the field of postcolonial studies is associated with two basic lines of inquiry: “the study of colonial discourse and the study of discourses produced by colonized or formerly colonized subjects.” Hargreaves, “A Neglected Precursor,” 59.

42. Said, Orientalism, 15.

43. Said, Orientalism, 12.

44. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Empire Writes Back, 2.

45. Tiffin, introduction to Past the Last Post, vii.


48. Tiffin, “Introduction,” vii. Helen Tiffin offers Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* as an example of a text straddling the postcolonial and the postmodern, while at the same time pointing out that a text’s distinction as “postmodern” is often more a function of how it is read than how it is constructed. See also Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” 348.


52. Burke, *Death and Return*, 163. Burke underlines the importance of accounting for national differences in reception of anti-subjective theories: “The specific historical and ethnological circumstances in which Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida promulgated extreme anti-subjectivism have not been taken into account [in America], and the discourse of the death of the author has been imported into the Anglo-American critical program without essential modifications, without having been translated in the broader sense of the term” (162).

53. Predecessors of 1960s French anti-authorialism include Proust (*Contre Sainte-Beuve*); the Russian Formalists who bracketed the author so as to focus on the “literariness” in literature—see Tomaševskij’s “Literature and Biography”; and American New Critics such as Wimsatt and Beardsley, whose essay “The Intentional Fallacy” argues against the use of the author in the evaluation of his or her work. It is also possible, however, to date the origins of anti-authorial discourse even further back in time, to the late nineteenth-century works of Flaubert, Valéry, and Mallarmé. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes very nearly channels the latter, who claimed that “the pure work implies the disappearance of the poet-speaker who yields the initiative to words animated by the inequality revealed in their collision with one another.” See Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis in Verse,” 8.

54. Burke, *Death and Return*, 21: “The working context in which Barthes wrote [“The Death of the Author”] is also significant. At the time, he was preparing to write a microscopic analysis of Balzac’s short-story ‘Sarrasine’—a project that was to emerge in 1970 as *S/Z*.”

55. This position is countered by phenomenological schools of criticism and “speech act” theorists (such as Searle and Austin) who foreground the speaker’s intentions as an integral part of the communicative act. See Burke, *Death and Return*, 140.


58. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 29. Note that in the first version of the translation appearing in *Aspen* (also translated by Richard Howard) “les sociétés ethnographiques” is translated as “primitive societies.”


60. Burke, *Death and Return*, 46. "Unlike any other of Barthes's texts, S/Z works accretively: it is a war of attrition against the ‘reality effect’ in ‘Sarrasine.’”


63. Charles Bonn, for example, has made suggestive comments regarding the institutional factors surrounding the conception and publication of Memmi’s 1964 *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d’expression française*. See [http://www.limag.refer.org/Textes/Bonn/2002Trieste.htm](http://www.limag.refer.org/Textes/Bonn/2002Trieste.htm). Bonn stated that this particular work “marks the first attempt at a significant definition of the ‘corpus.’ Published by Présence Africaine, it also marks the beginning of university-level research on this ‘corpus,’ as the EPHE was the first French university to welcome researchers interested in this still-problematic literary object: is it not significant that even if the director of the team was also a writer, the sponsoring department was an anthropology, not a literature, department?” See Bonn, “Petit historique.” Institutional factors such as this one, however, have yet to be studied in depth.

64. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 45.

65. Déjeux, one of the most prolific and earliest critics of francophone Maghrebi literature, is indeed a subject unto himself—one that deserves sustained critical attention as much for the importance of his contribution to Maghrebi literary studies as for his own personal trajectory. Déjeux set-
tled in North Africa after having served in the French army during World War II and was ordained by the pères blancs de Tunis in 1952; he remained in North Africa (attached to the Catholic congregation of Algiers) until 1981. One of the few repositories of information concerning Déjeux can be found on-line at the “Littératures du Maghreb” website maintained by Charles Bonn: http://www.limag.refer.org/Pagespersonnes/dejeuxNotice-BioParMoi.PDF.


67. These experimental forms include the mise en abyme structure of The Pillar of Salt (Memmi, 1953); the nonlinear narration of The Simple Past (Chraïbi, 1954) and Nedjma (Kateb Yacine, 1956); or the nouveau roman–inspired La répudiation (Boudjedra, 1969), to name only a few. For an exemplary type of counterrealist reading, see Nicholas Harrison’s Postcolonial Criticism. In an argument centered on Chraïbi’s The Simple Past, Harrison states that “elements are introduced that cannot but disconcert the normal patterns of ‘realist’ reading” (97).

68. The same methodology is used by Déjeux in his anthologies of francophone Maghrebi writing: La littérature maghrébine d’expression française (Algiers: Centre culturel français, 1970) and Littérature maghrébine de langue française (Montréal: Naaman, 1973). Both anthologies present biographical portraits of a dozen authors, preceded by a historical panorama of North African writing in French and an explanation of methodologies.

69. Le Centre international d’études francophones, housed within Paris IV (La Sorbonne), was founded in 1974. The scholars who studied with Déjeux include Charles Bonn and Guy Dugas, two of the best known French scholars of francophone Maghrebi literature.

70. Bhabha, “Representation and the Colonial Text,” 98.

71. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 50: “the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the author.”


73. I understand subaltern here in its Gramscian meaning, as it is used in postcolonial studies, that is, as referring to marginalized groups and the lower classes, or as a person deprived of agency as a result of his or her social status.

74. Burke, “Introduction to Feminism and the Authorial Subject,” in Authorship, 149.

75. I am thinking here of Jean Déjeux, Edmond Jouve, Joëlle Strike, and Jacqueline Arnaud, for example.
76. Nancy Miller, “Changing the Subject,” 106. This was first written in 1985 for conferences held at Brown University and the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee).

77. Miller, “Changing the Subject,” 104.

78. In his seminal essay “What Is an Author?” Foucault mused, echoing Beckett: “What does it matter who is speaking?”

79. Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, 61–62. Madwoman in the Attic is a feminist reading of Victorian literature that remains a benchmark in feminist literary criticism.

80. I want to state clearly, however, that I refer here only to a general trend in feminist theory, not to a definition of intention or praxis. Indeed, Alice Jardine has defined feminist criticism by its praxis, not by its practitioner, and encourages “continuing to explore fictions . . . so as to establish a topology of textual strategies used against the symbolic by both men and women.” Jardine, Gynesis, 47.

81. Cases in point: Jean Déjeux, Jacqueline Arnaud, Jacques Chevrier, Charles Bonn, and Guy Dugas—all of whom are French. Notable exceptions from the same era are Abdelkebir Khatibi and Albert Memmi. This trend, however, is beginning to change, particularly in other areas of the francophone world (one thinks of Caribbean writer-theorist Edouard Glissant, for example).

82. The notion of the end of “metanarratives” and their replacement by “mini-narratives” is put forth by Jean-François Lyotard in La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir.

83. Childs and Williams, “Post-colonial Intersections,” in An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory, 203.

2. Writing Back to Whom?

1. Memmi, Terre, 116. The failure in question is a relative one: Agar was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt in 1955. The prize was awarded to Roger Ikor for Les fils d’Avron.


4. Memmi’s references to self-assessment in literature and in essays (what he calls “drawing up a personal balance sheet”) are numerous. In a
recent interview, he noted that “true literature, that is a questioning of the self, actually permits a self-analysis.” Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.


7. I refer here to the concept of Doris Sommer’s study of Latin American literature and its tacit strategies of subversion in *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*.

8. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 3–30. In this section I rely, to a certain degree, on terms and notions developed by Lejeune, and while it is true that his work has its detractors, his taxonomy of autobiography and auto-diegetic narrative provides a useful tool and a much-needed vocabulary for discussing the ambiguities of this genre. Other elements that factor into the pact include the presence of titles that confirm the genre (memoires, autobiography) or the inclusion of a prefatory section in which the narrator makes claims that leave no doubt as to his identity with the juridical subject indicated on the cover of the book.


12. It is worth noting, however, that the novel was highly praised by French critics who “discovered an original voice whose pen, both incisive and moving, announced a most talented writer.” Latmani, “Driss Chraïbi.”


15. Kadra-Hadjadji, *Contestation*, 59. “He takes care to state that his novel is not an autobiography, as he is careful to combat the opinion that he himself had validated by retaining the real first names of family members and places in his work.” The article in question, published in *Démocratie* January 14, 1957, was signed only with the initials A.H.


19. See Borges, “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote.” The short story first appeared in the Argentine journal *Sur* in 1939. The first French translation...
was published by Gallimard in 1951 (Fictions, trans. P. Verdevoye and N. Ibarra).

20. Memmi, Pillar of Salt, 4. I have modified Edouard Roditi’s translation, which reads “We lived at the bottom of the Impasse Tarfoune.”


22. Memmi, Ce que je crois, 22.


25. Memmi, “Qu’est-ce qu’un sioniste?” in Juifs et arabes, 19. An English version of the book of essays was published under the title Jews and Arabs, trans. Eleanor Levieux (Chicago: J. Philip O’Hara, 1975); however, the first essay of the volume—“What Is a Zionist”—has been curiously omitted from the English translation, without comment.


29. “Tronja” is likely related to the Catalan word “taronja,” or mandarin orange. This seems both linguistically likely and reasonable, since (if we are to believe the author) a “tronja” is an exotic fruit.

30. Memmi, Ce que je crois, 23.

31. For more on reading the interview as a primary text and on authorial self-fashioning in the interview, see John Rodden, Performing the Literary Interview.


33. Ben Jelloun, “Règlement de contes”: “This first novel by Lofti Akalay is a total success and moves francophone Maghrebi literature out of the ghetto of autobiography and away from a certain bad conscience.”

34. I am thinking, for example, of the rekindling of autobiographical fervor in the form of new autobiographies such as Alain Robbe-Grillet’s Ghosts in the Mirror (1985) and Natalie Sarraute’s Childhood (1983). Coupled with a return of the subject, this new élan fostered texts that presented new or deconstructed versions of the discourse of the self. See Molkou, “L’autofiction,” 161.

35. Notable exceptions to this, with respect to Memmi, include Debra Kelly, Autobiography and Independence, and Joëlle Strike, Albert Memmi, in which Strike places both fiction and essays under the twin signs of autobiography and autography (the latter is distinguished from the former as “the reconstruction of the self through writing” [12]).
36. Paul de Man suggested that autobiography was “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.” “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921.

37. It is worth reminding the reader that St. Augustine hailed from Algeria, a fact underscored often by Assia Djebar, who refers to him as “Augustine the African” in Ces voix qui m’assiègent (en marge de ma francophonie), 223.

42. Olney, Tell Me Africa, 10.
43. Hornung and Ruhe, eds., Postcolonialisme et autobiographie, 1.
44. Doubrovsky, Fils.
45. Le Rouzic, “Écritures autobiographiques,” 54–55. See also Le Rouzic, “A propos de la dimension autobiographique du Fils du pauvre de Mouloud Feraoun,” in Mouralis, Autobiographies, 93. “It is certainly not an accident if, for many French-speaking Maghrebi writers their first work is the most autobiographical, the one in which the author puts the most of himself (contrary to the Western tradition).”
47. Hewitt, Autobiographical Tightropes, 194.
49. De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921. This is de Man’s translation of Genette.
50. Spivak, “How to Read a ’Culturally Different’ Book.”
51. André Chouraqui, Histoire des juifs en Afrique du Nord, 1:14. The perceived improvement in the status of French Jewry in the aftermath of the French Revolution (the 1789 “Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen” granted religious freedom to all citizens, and reforms drafted by the Constitutional Assembly in 1791 specifically granted citizenship to all Jews), created in Maghrebi Jews the belief that the same destiny would be reserved for them. The question of perception is an important one, as citizenship did not come to all French Jews at the same time: Jews from the east were considered a special case and were emancipated only a year after the other groups (from Bordeaux, Avignon and Paris) had already been granted their rights (1790). For more information on French Jews during
this critical period, see Robert Badinter's detailed study, *Libres et égaux: L'émancipation des Juifs sous la Révolution française*.

52. Despite their common colonizer, it is important not to gloss over the heterogeneity of the experiences of colonization in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. While French colonial powers took charge in Algeria in 1830, establishing a settler colony that would later become an overseas province, Morocco and Tunisia (beginning in 1881 and 1912, respectively) were administered as protectorates. The experience of their respective Jewish communities is, to a certain degree, a function of these administrative differences.


55. The Alliance israélite universelle is a scholastic organization dedicated to the education of diaspora Jews. “Since the second half of the nineteenth century the AIU’s mandate has given diaspora Jews a window onto the modern world. The majority of Arab Jews were prisoners of their dhimmi, or “tolerated” status in Islamic countries, and their rights were inferior to those of the majority Muslim population.” Bensoussan and Elbaz, eds., preface to *Témoignages*.


57. The Jews of Tunisia were the country’s first writers to produce literature in French. See, for example, Vitalis Danon’s novella *Ninette de la rue du Péché* (Tunis: La Kahéna, 1936) or Ryvel’s collection of short stories, *L’enfant de l’oukala* (Tunis: La Kahéna, 1931).

58. Chouraqui, *Histoire des juifs*, 1:24: “The political, economic, and cultural emancipation of the North African Jews was accompanied by a wave of anti-Semitism that reached far into the European population.”
59. Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 19. “In the brief period when they had a chance, the French Vichyites, the German Nazis, and the Italian Fascists applied in [North Africa] many of the same methods that would be used to devastating effect against the much larger Jewish populations of Europe, often at the same time and pace as they were being used in Europe. . . . The goal was to isolate Jews, to persecute them, and—in Tunisia at least—to lay the foundation for their eventual extermination.”

60. Déjeux, “Au Maghreb, langue française, langue natale du ‘je,’” 190: “The Jewish literature preceding the publication of *The Pillar of Salt* did not feature an emancipatory ‘I,’ and neither did that of the Muslim community.”

63. Dugas, *Littérature judéo-maghrébine*, 107: “Other than marrying outside the group, the worst betrayal of all is undoubtedly to become a writer, something to which most of the young characters in Judeo-Maghrebi novels aspire. . . . Writing, especially writing about the self, is always a way of seeking exile within the group, of trying to step outside of it, of exorcising the relationship with one’s family and its entourage.”

64. Dugas, *Littérature judéo-maghrébine*, 106.
65. Mouralis, *Autobiographies*, 3. “The importance of the collective conscience in African societies has often been underscored, and it has thereby become tempting to read autobiographical writing as an act that is inherently foreign to these.”

66. Albert Memmi, “Entretiens avec Albert Memmi,” *A voix nue: entretiens d’hier et d’aujourd’hui avec Salim Jay*, interview by Salim Jay, *France Culture*, January 8, 1990. The “collection” in question refers to an ensemble of Maghrebi Jewish folktales, proverbs, and parables which were collected, transcribed, and organized by the *pères blancs* (catholic missionaries) of Carthage. In this same interview Memmi claims to have frequented the missionaries and done research in their archives.

67. Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 37: “No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure. . . . For the writer, however, this object exists: It is not the language, it is the mother tongue. The writer is someone who plays with his mother’s body . . . in order to glorify it, embellish it, or in order to dismember it.”

68. I refer here to Fredric Jameson’s assertion that “third-world texts . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the em-

69. I refer here, of course, to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back.

70. Salman Rushdie is typically credited with coining the phrase “the Empire writes back” (Rushdie, “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance,” Times [London], July 3, 1982). In a 2003 interview, however, Rushdie specified that the article’s title was chosen by the Times and was likely suggested by the line in the article that stated, “those whom [the Empire] once colonized are carving out large territories within the [English] language for themselves. The Empire is striking back.” In other words, the iteration that has become a veritable concept within postcolonial studies was actually provided by the editors of the London newspaper and not by Rushdie himself (“Art, Writing: Salman Rushdie”).

71. Memmi, Colonizer and the Colonized, 85.

3. Writing without Seeing

1. Memmi, Nomade, 7.
2. Memmi, Nomade, 134.
4. Arnaud, La littérature maghrébine de langue française, 349.

6. “Iconotext” designates a work in which the elements of writing and plastic art form an indissociable whole. There are numerous examples of this type of presentation; one might think of the use of photographs and drawings in André Breton’s Nadja (Paris: Gallimard, 1928) or, more recently, the use of photographs in Austerlitz by W. G. Sebald (Munich: C. Hanser, 2001).


8. Jay, Downcast Eyes, 23–24. Although my understanding of the conception of vision in French thought is indebted to Jay’s intellectual history, similar questions are tackled—albeit outside of the specific realm of French thought—by scholars like Jonathan Crary who, in his introduction to Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture, situates his work in the wake of Derrida, Blanchot, Bataille, and Lacan, all of whom “share a transhistorical insistence on a fundamental absence at the heart of seeing, on the impossibility of the perception of presence, or of an unmedi-

9. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 15. It is Jay’s contention that this is particularly evident in France.

10. Jay situates this sea change in the discourse on the visual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the figure of Henri Bergson: “It is in his work that we will encounter the initial frontal attack on ocularcentrism in modern French philosophy” (*Downcast Eyes*, 186).

11. Shohat, “Sacred Word, Profane Image,” 24–25. Art historians in particular have contributed to an understanding of the multiple interpretations of the Second Commandment’s prohibition; the existence of Jewish figurative art as early as the first centuries of the Common Era suggests that the taboo on graven images was often interpreted loosely. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Second Commandment was at times far more important to Christians and Muslims than to Jews: “Jews, however, never knew or countenanced such intense rejection of images. Even when the representation of human figures was seen as unacceptable, there was no overall theory of rejection, no systematic destruction of images.” Revel-Neher, “‘With Wisdom and Knowledge of Workmanship,’” 22. Jay also suggests that the Jewish tradition with respect to iconoclasm is more complicated than it appears at first glance (549).


13. Written in 1763 to John Locke, the letter from William Molyneux which gives its name to the “problem” was published by Locke in the second edition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The Molyneux problem questioned whether a man born blind and having learned to identify a cube by touch would, if cured and placed once again before a cube, be able to identify it. Paulson, *Enlightenment*, 5.


16. This is very close to one of the commonplaces of Greek mythology, whereby a mortal blinded by the gods is in turn granted superior powers of “internal” vision, or insight, as reparations for the inflicted disability.

17. According to Horkheimer and other critics of the Enlightenment, the desire to move beyond alterity may be read as part of the Enlightenment project to suppress difference and alterity. Spencer, “Horkheimer, Max (1895–1973).” See also Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.


23. Levin, “Keeping Foucault,” 446.
25. As described by Chloé Taylor in her discussion of Levinas’s interview “On Obliteration” (in Taylor, “Hard, Dry Eyes”). See also Levin, *Philosopher’s Gaze*.
27. In British English, blind man’s bluff is often called “blind man’s buff,” with “buff” referring to the blow delivered by the “blind” player when he tags one of the others. In French the name of the game derives from the story of a man named Colin, who meted out justice with *un maillard* [a mallet]. The *colin maillard*, or the man with the mallet, is the “blind man” of the game. It is interesting to note that the mallet used to “tag” the players has become the symbol of justice. Although Derrida’s translator uses “buff,” I prefer “blind man’s bluff” for its suggestiveness: who is bluffing whom? For other explanations of the origins of *colin maillard* in French, see the chapter entitled “Histoire du colin-maillard et du jeu des barres” in Fournier, *Histoire anecdotique*.
30. This is one of several versions of the story of the blinding of Tiresias. Some versions, for example, hold that he was blinded for revealing the secrets of the gods.
31. In the English version, the title of the first chapter “L’épreuve” is translated simply as “Prologue,” and the title of the second instance of “L’épreuve”—the second to last chapter of the novel—is translated as “Examination.” Because I am interested in teasing out the polysemia of this term in French, I have opted to preserve the original.
32. Memmi, *Pillar*, ix, x.
33. Benillouche’s story is consistent with the realities of twentieth-century Tunisia, where the Jewish community was socially, economically, and “ethnically” heterogeneous. The Jews of Italian origin (mostly from Livorno) tended to be of upper-middle-class standing (called Grana or Gornim—derived from Ligorno, a dialectal pronunciation of the Italian coastal city of Livorno), while Jews descended from earlier waves of mi-
gration, namely, the Palestinian Diaspora of the first and second centuries, were generally lower-class artisans called Touansa or Touensa (“Tunisians” in Judeo-Arabic dialect). Benillouche (and Memmi) belong to this second group, sometimes referred to as the “native” Jews. Perkins, History of Modern Tunisia, and Rosenzweig, “History of the Jews of Tunisia.”

34. Memmi, Pillar, 104.
35. The English translation entitles this chapter “The Party”; however, I prefer a literal translation of the original (“The Stairwell”).
36. Memmi, Pillar, 196.
40. Bénaim-Ouaknine and Elbaz, “Albert Memmi ou le cul-de-sac de l’écriture,” 13. “Thus, the stairway, symbol of transcendence, in fact offers nothing of the sort to the narrator who so ardently desires it.”
42. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 25.
45. Foucault suggests that the “crisis heterotopias” of primitive societies—sites reserved for individuals in a state of “crisis” (such as menstruation, pregnancy, old age)—are replaced in contemporary society by “heterotopias of deviance” (the psychiatric hospital, the prison)—sites where individuals whose behavior is deviant to established norms are placed. “Of Other Spaces,” 24–25.
49. Blanchot, Space of Literature, 48.
50. Blanchot, Infinite Conversation, 27.
51. Memmi, Pillar, ix.
52. Paulson, Enlightenment, 13.
53. Paulson, Enlightenment, 34.
55. Memmi, Pillar, x.
56. Memmi, Pillar, 323.
57. For a compelling analysis of the generic ambiguity of The Pillar of Salt, see Nick Harrison, “Ce pouvoir me fut aussi funeste que sauveur . . . .”
61. Arnaud, *Littérature maghrébine*, 363. “. . . he can take imaginary journeys, having less and less need for an external reference point.”
62. Arnaud, *Littérature maghrébine*, 363. “[The story of] ‘Red-Eye’ evokes a sailor whose eyes are burned while gazing at cliffs of rock salt (reminiscent of *The Pillar of Salt*, or rather, an inverted metaphor) who doesn’t regret the loss of his sight because the spectacle was so fascinating (in an inverted myth of Ulysses and the Sirens, Red-Eye remained alone and unprotected while the crew hid in the hold).”
63. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 27.
64. The use of different typefaces was briefly highlighted above in my discussion of *Pillar*; however, it is not until *The Scorpion* that the signifying capacity of typography can be said to constitute a technique. The typographical variants of *Pillar* take on their significance largely in light of Memmi’s later production.
66. Memmi has stated that J.H. is an abbreviation for “jeune homme” [young man]. *Terre*, 267.
68. This title prefigures and announces Memmi’s subsequent novel, *Le désert; ou, La vie et les aventures de Jubaïr el-Mammi* (1977). In *Le désert*, “Le royaume du dedans” [The Kingdom of Within] is the name of the main character’s lost country.
71. Memmi, *Scorpion*, 4. “One good thing anyhow is that it must be part of that novel of his.”
78. Barthes, *S/Z*. The “scriptible” is “what can be written (rewritten) today . . . the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of text” (4). Barthes goes on to establish the difference between the two values: “Opposite the writerly text,
then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text.”

79. Memmi, Scorpion, 198.
80. Memmi, Scorpion, 198.
81. Memmi, Scorpion, 50.
82. Memmi, Scorpion, 47.
83. Memmi, Scorpion, 129.
84. Memmi, Scorpion, 131.
85. I reference here Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City,” in The Practice of Everyday Life, in which he rhapsodizes about a bird’s-eye perspective of New York City, wondering “what is the source of this ‘pleasure of seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (92).

86. Perkins, History of Modern Tunisia, 144–45. Between 1955 and 1959, 17,000 Europeans left Tunisia: two-thirds of the total European population. The creation of Israel in 1948 saw the exodus of 15 percent of the Jewish population (85,000) over four years. In 1956, 6,500 Jews left the country, leaving the Tunisian Jewish community at 58,000. This number would be reduced by half again in 1967, due to the violence that erupted in the country at the onset of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

87. Memmi, Scorpion, 54.
88. Memmi, Scorpion, 148.
89. Immediately following Tunisian independence, a number of laws were enacted which made life difficult for Jews living in the country: Jewish areas were earmarked for urban renewal, and entire neighborhoods were razed; at the same time (1958) the Tunisian Jewish Community Council was abolished.

90. This was indeed the case, historically. In 1958 in Tunisia Rabbinical tribunals and community councils were dissolved “in the name of national unity.” (This was also the case in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and other Arab countries.) Generally speaking, the Jews of North Africa were “squeezed out of the economy, replaced, and boycotted by the Muslims.” Maurice Roumani, The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries: A Neglected Issue, 32–33.

91. Reeder, “Maurice Roche,” 351.
92. Memmi, Scorpion, 315. This note is omitted from the English translation.
93. Memmi, Scorpion, 132.
95. Reeder, “Maurice Roche,” 351.
96. As Reeder writes, “polysemy explodes into asemia in an overabundance of possible contexts” (“Maurice Roche,” 352).
97. Memmi, Écriture colorée, 17.
98. Memmi, Écriture colorée, 41.
100. For a more detailed discussion of Memmi’s reversal of ekphrasis, please see Brozgal, “Blindness, the Visual and Ekphrastic Impulses.”
102. Jay, Downcast Eyes, 591.

4. From Colonizer and Colonized to Decolonization and the Decolonized

1. The global reach of the essay is exemplified by Memmi’s description of its reception: “The Canadians mimeographed the Portrait of the Colonized and distributed it to churches and universities” and “more recently, the Croatians have used it to find arguments in favor of federalism.” Memmi, Terre, 143.

2. Foreign-language versions include English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Czech, Japanese, Farsi, Basque, and, perhaps most notably, both Arabic and Hebrew. See also Memmi, “Entretiens avec Albert Memmi,” and S. G. Miller, afterword to Colonizer and the Colonized, 158.

3. The distinction, for Memmi, between racism and heterophobia is that the former bases its rejection of the other on biological differences, whereas the latter’s rejection of the other may be based on any perceived difference. See Memmi, Racism, 117–21. For a more anecdotal description of heterophobia, see Memmi, “La peur de l’autre.”


5. Gordimer, “In the Penal Colonies: What Albert Memmi Saw and Did Not See.” “Studying the colonizer, Memmi gives much attention to the grades of privilege accorded in the colonial situation, and it is here that his perspective is most evidently that of the Maghreb, and only notionally extended to the rest of the African continent and colonized countries everywhere. This leads to conclusions that do not necessarily hold good for colonization generally.” Nowhere in the text, however, does The Colonizer and the Colonized lay claim to serving as a manual for understanding worldwide colonization; the notion that it should stems from its having been read as a universal document.

6. Joëlle Strike gives this particularism a specifically autobiographical twist: she has suggested that Colonizer is the theoretical iteration of
the drama represented in Agar, Memmi’s second novel which preceded the publication of Colonizer by only two years: “[Agar] comes across as the metaphor of the essay; however, it is an inverted metaphor: the novel, which was written first, may be read as an allegory of the colonial relationship, which will be theorized later on in the essay.” Strike, Albert Memmi, 135. In Agar, a mixed marriage between a French Catholic and a Tunisian Jew is devastated by the couple’s inability to negotiate their cultural and religious differences. As previously noted, the novel has most often been read as autobiographical.

7. Memmi, Colonizer, xiii. I have modified Greenfeld’s translation, which uses the present tense: “I know the colonizer from the inside almost as well as I know the colonized.”

8. Sartre, preface to Colonizer, xxii–xxiii. “This lucid and sober work may be classed among the ‘passionate geometries,’ for its calm objectivity represents transcendence of suffering and anger.”

9. Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 63. In addition to Johnson’s translation of jeu as “game,” I have also included Edward Said’s translation of jeu as “internal play.” While Johnson’s version is more faithful to the original, Said’s is particularly well suited to the context at hand, as I describe Colonizer as possessing an “internal play.” Said, “Problem of Textuality,” 674.

10. Genette, Paratexts. The paratext is “what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1).

11. This is Richard Watts’s contention with respect to essays written by other francophone intellectuals (Senghor, Fanon), and I am indebted to his work on the paratext in francophone postcolonial literature; his excellent study, however, does not take into account works by Albert Memmi. See Watts, Packaging Post/Coloniality.

12. As Watts has argued, in the case of Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” the preface to Senghor’s Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache (1948), the eminence of the paratextual element has surpassed that of the text itself. For Watts, “Black Orpheus” had the effect of putting négritude “on the cultural map.” Watts, Packaging Post/Coloniality, 3.

13. The English translation substantially alters the original French title, Portrait du décolonisé (arabo-musulman et de quelques autres), which might have been rendered as “Portrait of the Decolonized (Arab-Muslim and of Several Others).” Like the translation of the 1957 essay, this version omits the notion of the portrait, in addition to erasing the ethnic and religious specificity embedded in the original French.

15. Genette, Paratexts, 1.

16. Like all questions surrounding “colonialisms,” periodization is somewhat subjective. For example, Phyllis Taoua places the emergence of what she refers to as “anti-colonial protest” in the early 1930s. For Taoua, anti-colonial protest (of French imperialism) began with the publication and subsequent repression of the Caribbean student pamphlet Légitime défense; the publication’s “stated goal of putting the Surrealist project in service of an anti-colonial revolution was threatening enough in 1932 for Légitime défense to be immediately censored.” Taoua goes on to argue in favor of a sustained examination of “the muting effects of censorship and surveillance on the birth of an anti-colonial sentiment.” Taoua, Forms of Protest, 52–53.

17. Wehrs, “Sartre’s Legacy in Postcolonial Theory,” 763. “Still the dominant conceptual frameworks of postcolonial theory remain tethered to assumptions embedded in the first form of anticolonial theory to assume a major role in Western intellectual history, that of Jean-Paul Sartre and his associates.” It is important to note, however, that this vision of Sartrean thought as an obvious precursor to postcolonial theory is not shared by all scholars; in his article on postcolonial predecessors, Patrick Williams asserts that Sartre’s contribution to postcolonial studies remains unacknowledged. “‘Faire peau neuve’—Césaire, Fanon, Memmi, Sartre, and Senghor,” in Forsdick and Murphy, Francophone Postcolonial Studies, 190.

18. Julien, preface to Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache, viii.

19. Of course, Sartre had previously tackled other forms of discrimination, notably the question of anti-Semitism in Anti-Semite and Jew (1946).

20. Memmi, Colonizer, 70.


22. Galmiche and Robichez, preface to “Poèmes de la résistance berbère (Maroc central),” 981.

23. Galmiche and Robichez, preface, 980.


26. It is also worth mentioning that Sartre had invited Memmi to participate in the editorial meetings of Les Temps modernes and to direct a special issue devoted to Tunisia. While Memmi did attend a few meetings, he has made clear (in his essays and in interviews) that he did not care for the
cult of personality exercised by Sartre and preferred to keep his distance from the group.

27. Mannoni’s text was reprinted in 1984 under the title Prospéro et Caliban: psychologie de la colonisation.

28. The most notable attack on Mannoni came from Fanon in “The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples,” in Black Skin, White Masks. In Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects, Emily Apter summarizes Fanon’s complaint against Mannoni quite succinctly: “Fanon insinuates that Mannoni was trying to get colonial racism off the hook by particularizing it” (82).


30. Mannoni’s influence on Fanon is discussed at length in Jock McCulloch’s Black Soul, White Artifact: Fanon’s Clinical Psychology and Social Theory. For a very persuasive essay on the import of Mannoni’s work for postcolonial studies, see Lane, “Psychoanalysis and Colonialism Redux.”

31. Fanon, Black Skin, 101–7.

32. Fanon, Black Skin, 81.

33. It should be noted, however, that Fanon alternates between the terms le noir [the negro] and homme/femme de couleur [man/woman of color].

34. Césaire’s Discourse was published in pamphlet form by Editions Réclame in 1950.


37. Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 32.

38. Memmi, Colonizer and the Colonized, 147.

39. Césaire, “La mort des colonies,” and Sartre, “Le colonialisme est un système,” Les temps modernes 123 (March–April 1956): 1371–86. The full text of all speeches given at the meeting, as well as the text of the motion adopted by the participants, was published by the Comité des intellectuels (rue Jacob, Paris).

40. Also known as the Asia-Africa Conference, or the Unaligned Conference of 1955; dubbed the Bandung Conference in honor of the event’s host city. The nonaligned movement brought together countries not affiliated with either of the cold war superpowers. It is remarkable, as Howard Davies notes, that Les Temps modernes carried no coverage of Bandung. Davies, Sartre, 63.

41. Sauvy, “Trois mondes, une planète.” Sauvy echoes the text of Emmanuel-Jospeh Sieyès’s pamphlet “Qu’est-ce que le tiers état?” published in
1789, just prior to the meeting of the Estates-General: “What is the third estate? Nothing. What has it always been in the political arena? Nothing. What does it want? To become something (in the political arena).”

42. Sauvy, review of L’autopsie du tiers-mondisme by Bertrand Nezes.

43. Jean Amrouche, a Maghrebi Christian, was one of Memmi’s professors at the lycée Carnot in Tunis.

44. Amrouche, “La France comme mythe et comme réalité.”

45. “I propose to call heterophobia this rejection of the other, out of fear of that which is different; it is not quite racism.” Memmi, “La peur de l’autre.”


48. Memmi has stated that “Sartre did me a huge service, of course. I was unknown at the time, and Sartre’s and Camus’s prefaces did me a great service, and I thank them across time.” Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

49. Memmi, preface to Colonizer, x.


51. Memmi, Terre, 147.

52. Sartre, preface, xxii.

53. Sartre, preface, xxiii.


55. Rabémmanjara, “Albert Memmi et le problème colonial,” 152.

56. Rabémmanjara, “Albert Memmi et le problème colonial,” 152. “His argument, once again based on the facts and nothing but the facts could not be contradicted or contested in the slightest.”


58. Memmi, Portrait du colonisé précédé du Portrait du colonisateur, 130. This phrase, curiously, has been omitted from Greenfeld’s English translation; the translation here is mine.

59. In Gayatri Spivak’s critique of Deleuze, she draws our attention to the two senses of representation: “speaking for,” as in politics, and representation as “re-presentation,” as in art or philosophy. Spivak uses the German terms vertreten and darstellen to differentiate between the two. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 275–76.

Notes to pages 121–127
60. Strike, *Albert Memmi*, 134. Quoting Barthes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Strike notes that “the ‘he’ used for the colonizer as well as for the colonized establishes a distance that allows Memmi to ‘show his character rather than embody his character’” (147).


63. Murphy, “Power of Reason,” 259–60. Patrick Williams makes a similar argument regarding the colonial essay, using Césaire as an example: “In ‘Black Orpheus,’ Sartre had examined some of the contradictions involved in black writers like Césaire using the French language to denounce French racism or colonialism. Césaire here takes things a stage further as he uses a typically French form—the literary-philosophical-political essay—as a . . . weapon with which to destroy the claims of that culture.” Williams, “‘Faire peau neuve,’” 184–85.

64. France, “Traditions of the Essay,” 32. Memmi notes that his writing process is similar to Montaigne’s: “Work is all about isolating yourself, being alone. . . . For the past 40 years I’ve been going up to my attic—like Montaigne in his tower, I was alone with myself—and set about doing the day’s work.” Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

65. Memmi, preface to *Colonizer*, viii.


68. Murphy, “Power of Reason,” 265.


70. Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 67. Translation slightly modified for readability.


72. It is important to distinguish between the first-person pronoun as deictic marker and the “rhetorical I” used at various points throughout the text. The meaning of the former, derived from the Greek word for “display, demonstration, or reference,” necessitates a reliance on contextual clues. The “rhetorical I” (known in its plural form as a nosism, or a “royal we”) is
very much a feature of French-language prose stylistics and simply serves to advance the argument without resorting to the passive voice.

74. Memmi, *Colonizer*, 90.
75. Greenfield’s English translation omits the italics used in the original. In this and subsequent citations, I have reintroduced them for the sake of consistency and readability.

76. Memmi, *Colonizer*, 75–76.
83. In addition to Bhabha’s work, for an excellent study of stereotype in French and francophone cultural productions, see Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*.

84. The Spanish (*Retrato del colonizado, precedido por el retrato del colonizador*) and Portuguese (*Retrato do Colonizado Precedido pelo Retrato do Colonizador*) translations hew most closely to the original French; the Italian (*Ritratto del colonizzato e del colonizzatore*) retains the notion of the portrait and the order of the two protagonists but removes the adjectival “preceded by”; the German (*Der Kolonisator und der Kolonisierte: Zwei Porträts*) mirrors the English word order, but keeps the concept of the portrait.

85. According to Susan Gilson Miller, who wrote the afterword to the 1991 English edition of *Colonizer*, the notion of the “portrait,” that is, “of the two main characters as actual personality types, rather than as vague abstractions unanchored in reality,” is key to understanding the concept. Miller, afterword, 156.

86. Translations, although not explicitly addressed by Genette, may fall within a category of paratext known as “epitext,” defined as “any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume.” (Genette, *Paratexts*, 344). This status of the translation as paratext/epitext, though outside the realm of this study, would likely require further attention and nuance.

91. Mudimbé, *Invention of Africa*, 85. Mudimbé explains that “while correcting the potential theoretical excesses of the ideology of négritude, [“Black Orpheus”] did so in a high-handed manner, thwarting other possible orientations of the movement. At the same time, it subjugated the militants’ generosity of heart and mind to the fervor of a political philosophy” (84).


94. Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, lvii.


97. Sartre, preface to *Wretched*, xlvii–xlviii, lvii.


99. Sartre, preface to *Colonizer*, xxi. I have altered Greenfeld’s translation here.

100. Sartre, preface to *Colonizer*, xxiii.


102. Sartre, preface to *Colonizer*, xxiii. Sartre also puts forth an economic argument in “Le colonialisme est un système”: his first enumerated point is “Que le problème algérien est d’abord économique” [The Algerian problem is first and foremost economic] (1371). In her afterword to the 1991 English edition, Susan Gilson Miller summed up their differences in the following manner: “What for Sartre was textbook economics was for Memmi a passion play fraught with universal meanings” (168).

103. Memmi, *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 5.

104. As Memmi writes in his introduction to *Colonizer and the Colonized*: “To observe the life of the colonizer and the colonized is to discover rapidly that the daily humiliation of the colonized, his objective subjugation, are not merely economic” (xii).

105. Sartre, preface to *Colonizer and the Colonized*, xxv. Howard Davies, in his study on Sartre and *Les temps modernes*, notes that Sartre’s position in 1951 was closer to Memmi’s of 1957; however, by the time he wrote the preface he felt that “the representations studied by Memmi [were] ideological in the sense that they [expressed] social relations which are conditioned by the socio-economic order of the colony.” Davies, *Sartre*, 85.


107. Sartre, preface to *Colonizer and the Colonized*, xxv.

108. Miller, afterword to *Colonizer and the Colonized*, 168–69.


111. In his introduction to *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Memmi wrote that the 2004 essay is “to some extent” the continuation of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (xi).

112. Memmi, however, has been criticized for his use of fact and figure: in his review titled “Assertion Rather than Evidence,” Richard Rathbone argues that the lack of bibliographical support (such as endnotes or footnotes) and the lack of reflection on the statistics provided is a major weakness of the essay.

113. Memmi, *Decolonization*, 86.


120. In our interview, Memmi insisted on the fact that when he does return to Tunisia in a professional capacity, it is always at the invitation of the French embassy in Tunisia. Memmi claims that the Ben Ali government never extended an invitation to him; tacitly, he also suggests that he has never been offered a visiting post at the university in Tunis because the government would not approve. Memmi, interview with author, October 30, 2009.

121. Memmi, interview with author.


124. John Galbo’s review essay, for example, begs for “more subtlety, fewer Manichean stereotypes,” noting that Memmi is “unwilling to acknowledge that progressivist ideology produces its own asymmetries of power, its own self-fulfilling stereotypes between the ‘advanced liberal West’ and the ‘regressive, pathological, emotional Middle East.’” Galbo, review of *Decolonization*.

125. For a discussion of ambivalence in Memmi’s work (ranging from his novels to his essays), see Crowley, “Albert Memmi: The Conflict of Legacies.”
Continuations

1. Barbery et al., “Pour une ‘litterature-monde’ en français.” The forty-four signatories include writers working in French with origins in a variety of countries, including France.

2. Barbery et al., “Toward a ‘World-Literature’ in French”: “we’re witnessing the birth of a new constellation, in which language freed from its exclusive pact with the nation, free from every other power hereafter but the powers of poetry and the imaginary, will have no other frontiers but those of the spirit.” All translations of the manifesto are from this version; however, I have changed the translation of esprit from spirit to the more accurate mind.

3. Too numerous to cite, I nonetheless draw the reader’s attention to Françoise Lionnet’s excellent critical analysis, “Universalisms and Francophonies,” and Camille de Toledo’s Vister le Flurkistan ou les illusions de la littérature-monde (Visiting Flurkistan, or The illusions of a world literature). The manifesto was also criticized by Abdou Diouf, general secretary of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, in an article titled “La francophonie, une réalité oubliée” (Francophonie, a forgotten reality), Diouf writes: “I particularly deplore your choice to hold yourselves up as the gravediggers of francophonie, not on the basis of grounded arguments, which would have had the benefit of opening the debate, but by giving new energy to clichés that have been worn out” (my translation).

4. Again, too numerous to cite in extenso, I mention only the special issue of sites: Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures 14, no. 1 (January 2010), and international colloquia organized in places as diverse as Tallahassee (“Littérature-monde: New Wave or New Hype?” Florida State University, February 12–14, 2009) and Algiers (“Littérature-monde: Enjeux et perspectives,” Université d’Alger, February 23–25, 2009).

5. Memmi, Colonizer and the Colonized, 111.


11. David Damrosch is useful here: “I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language. . . . a work only has an _effective_ life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture.” Damrosch, _What Is World Literature?_ 4.


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