

*Marie N'Diaye
Blankness and Recognition*



Andrew Asibong

MARIE NDIAYE
Blankness and Recognition

Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures

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ANDREW ASIBONG

Marie NDiaye

Blankness and Recognition

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Why couldn't they see it? It still puzzles me.

Frances Farmer

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I owe Marie NDiaye herself more than words can say, but dedicate this book to Suzanne Dow, my November '77 *consœur* ("an excellent vintage!" as she once put it), in solidarity and rage.

Abbreviations

AV	<i>Autoportrait en vert</i>
CC	<i>Comédie classique</i>
DSE	<i>La Diabliesse et son enfant</i>
EF	<i>En famille</i>
FCB	<i>La Femme changée en bûche</i>
GP	<i>Les Grandes Personnes</i>
H	<i>Hilda</i>
L	<i>Ladivine</i>
LGP	<i>Les Grandes Personnes</i>
MCE	<i>Mon cœur à l'étroit</i>
N	<i>La Naufragée</i>
P	<i>Providence</i>
PDM	<i>Papa doit manger</i>
PP	<i>Les Paradis de Prunelle</i>
QRA	<i>Quant au riche avenir</i>
RC	<i>Rosie Carpe</i>
RH	<i>Rien d'humain</i>
S	<i>La Sorcière</i>
SE	<i>Les Serpents</i>
SO	<i>'Les Sœurs'</i>
SOU	<i>Le Souhait</i>
TMA	<i>Tous mes amis</i>
TFP	<i>Trois femmes puissantes</i>
UTS	<i>Un temps de saison</i>

‘C’est justement qu’il n’y a rien!’: Introducing NDiaye Blankness

He turned toward me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication. ‘Nitre?’ he asked, at length. ‘Nitre,’ I replied. ‘How long have you had that cough?’ ‘Ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh!’ My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes. ‘It is nothing,’ he said, at last.

Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Cask of Amontillado’

My first encounter with Marie NDiaye’s world was traumatic. It was a production of her play *Papa doit manger* at the national theatre, the Comédie-Française, in 2003, an event which had been receiving a great deal of publicity in France at the time. As the lights came up and the audience began to applaud, the two women sitting next to me asked me if I was going to be all right. It was an embarrassing situation. Juliet Mitchell provides us with a useful working definition of that over-used term ‘trauma’:

A trauma, whether physical or psychical, must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. The severity of the breach is such that even if the incident is expected, the experience cannot be foretold. We cannot thus make use of anxiety as a preparatory signal. The death of a sick relative, the amputation of a diseased limb may be consciously known about in advance, but if they are to be described as traumatic then the foreknowledge was useless. In trauma we are untimely ripped. (Mitchell, 1998: 121)

What could I tell these strangers who were so politely inquiring after my well-being? That the play we'd just seen had ripped me wide open? That a ghost had stuck its tongue in my ear? Couldn't they feel it inside them too? They seemed just fine. All the people clapping furiously around us seemed fine, in fact, uplifted – perhaps – by the humour, novelty and charm of the unprecedented multicultural spectacle they had just enjoyed in the house of Molière. Perhaps they were pretending. After all, wasn't that just what I was doing when I eventually reassured the women that I was perfectly all right? Only I could know that time had stopped, for me, the moment the curtains went up. The dead-eyed performers had bonded with a buried part of myself, something as blank and ghoulish as they were. And life would never be the same again.¹

A reader unfamiliar with the plays and prose fiction of Marie NDiaye might conclude from my slightly mystical testimony that her narratives and situations must themselves contain some kind of deep intensity, glowing, in the manner of classical tragedy, or 1950s Hollywood melodrama, with a wild and cathartic potential for pure feeling. It is true that her plots are, on the whole, rich, overwhelming, bizarre. As Pierre Lepape puts it in his review of NDiaye's 2001 novel *Rosie Carpe*:

Voilà en tout cas un roman à qui l'on ne pourra faire le reproche de n'être pas romanesque. Il s'en passe des choses dans *Rosie Carpe*! Il y a des intrigues multiples, des personnages qui vivent des aventures, des rebondissements, des surprises, de la couleur, des décors, des atmosphères, des sentiments et même des meurtres [...] On a moins l'impression de lire Marie NDiaye que de se laisser séduire par une sirène qui ne craint pas d'abuser les charmes de sa voix. Elle vous entraîne dans les entrelacs de ses phrases pulpeuses et asymétriques, elle vous fait croire l'incroyable, tire du magique de l'ordinaire. (Lepape, 2001)

And yet, despite all this fantastical movement and colour, in NDiaye's world something is always missing.² There are holes, at the level of narrative, character, psychology and tone. These holes gape, but they do so in a discreet and disarmingly winsome manner and, as a result, can go unnoticed by the reader or spectator. At one level, it appears that all is well: characters speak in impeccably constructed sentences, frequently bursting with imperfect subjunctives, and describe intriguing worlds of magic, mystery and burlesque happenings. At another level, however, we are confronted with a set of seductive, incomprehensible blanks.

One way of beginning to think about NDiaye's 'blank effect' – or 'blank affect' – is to consider her protagonists' reluctance to talk, or even to appear. Some of NDiaye's characters keep themselves blank

and hidden by being literally, physically absent. Others never speak. Others still, having both appeared and spoken, inexplicably dematerialize. The vast majority of NDiaye's protagonists, though, perform their blankness via a strangely cut-off, unemotional demeanour, a deadness which seemingly nothing can wake up or make come alive: 'Elle semblait être là, avec son corps onduleux et fin, son beau visage encore lisse, comme poli, satiné, et cependant sa personnalité était ailleurs, captive d'il ne savait quoi, hors d'atteinte' (*L*, 377). These zombified characters frequently participate, apparently without malice, in the psychic – and sometimes physical – 'deadening' of others, at the same time as they themselves are psychically, and sometimes physically, 'deadened'. In the opening scene of *Papa doit manger*, little Mina – a vampiric name if ever there was one – powerfully replicates the 'undead' demeanour of her mother, as she authoritatively chatters with her father on the doorstep of the family apartment over which she holds guard. As the play progresses, however, we watch Mina herself become more and more violently dehumanized, along with her younger sister Ami, by the blankly deranged adults around her. The child thus finds herself in the paradigmatic predicament of the NDiaye protagonist: having been groomed to practise a *modus operandi* that systematically denies the reality of her own and other people's feelings, it is the passive experience of this absence of emotion that will cause her to crumble, disrupt her sense of being a living human, and precipitate her descent into depression. Members of NDiaye's 'blank community' find themselves thrust at birth into mechanical modes of behaviour, and they are often wiped out by a slightly modified (often fantastical) strain of inhumanness.

In this book, I want to argue that the aspects of Marie NDiaye's writing with which we, as her readers and spectators, need to engage most urgently are not so much its many satisfying riches – classical, medieval and modernist intertextualities aplenty; compelling, complex and witty deployments of syntax; bold experimentations with narrative form and perspective – but rather their zones of representational and affective impoverishment.³ NDiaye's repeated performance of different forms of traumatic absence contains something more obscurely powerful than her talent, knowledge or charm, something which, given the chance, may connect to repressed dimensions of the reader's emotional and ethical core. Her depictions of a blankness at large in contemporary Western systems, force us to consider how various 'dead' aspects of our societies, from cradle to grave, via school, family and so-called

community, cultivate the development of internal holes that, if left ignored and untreated, become too yawning to fill. Quite apart from being remarkable works of art, then, NDiaye's plays and fictions could be said to perform a crucial therapeutic – and potentially political – act, namely, in Jed Sekoff's words, that of 'constituting absence, in place of an adherence to deadness' (1999: 122). In giving her readers and spectators new signs and symbols with which to conceive of unmourned emptiness and loss, NDiaye's blank art offers fresh and disturbing images with which those readers and spectators may, perhaps, be sufficiently stimulated to move forward towards new forms of life, colour and presence.

In approaching NDiaye from the perspective of emptiness, negation and spectrality, I shall draw on both psychotherapeutic and 'political' discourses, ways of examining the world which her peculiar depictions of absence both expand and, crucially, *join up* in a powerful and unusual manner. NDiaye's strange stories force us, incredibly, to glimpse connections between parents' unnoticed internalization of their own parents' ghosts and their need, as adults, to make ghosts of their own children and the children of others. They build bridges between a person's sense of herself as 'not really there' and her subsequent participation in systems of annihilation and extermination that depend on framing others as non-existent. They prevent us from separating the private from the political, compelling us instead to hold simultaneously in our minds the various ways in which a person might make the journey from full aliveness to virtual deadness, or how s/he might impose that horrific experience on somebody else. And yet, at the same time, and quite unlike most other texts for which we might claim similarly weighty implications, her stories *glitter*, remaining magical and witty, fantastical and gay. In the remainder of this introduction I shall attempt to present some of the key contexts for understanding NDiaye's mysteriously brilliant deployment of blankness. I shall first consider aspects of her biography and public persona, with particular reference to the place (or rather non-place) of 'race' in her declared understanding of her own life and work, before going on to analyse ways in which her developing stardom has contributed to an unsettling yet fruitful dynamic of splitting, paradox and denial. I shall move on to explore psychoanalytic discourses which may shine new light on the role of disavowal in her fictional and theatrical universe, paying particularly close attention to the function of social stigma in her protagonists' need to negate both psychic and physical reality. I subsequently consider the

haunting presence of the 'spectral family' as an unavoidable dimension in our theorization of NDiaye's blanks, before, finally, reflecting on how her deployment of a 'fantastical' aesthetic is effective in communicating a vision of existence predicated on constant uncertainty regarding one's social and ontological status. Some of NDiaye's texts will be referred to briefly in the course of the introduction for illustrative purposes – and the reader is urged to consult the plot summaries at the back of the book for greater familiarity with the stories from which these examples are taken – but more detailed readings of the *œuvre*, treated for the most part chronologically, will be reserved for the book's subsequent chapters.

Nothing Much to Speak of: NDiaye's 'Unremarkable' Origins

In the central chapter of NDiaye's fourth novel *En famille* (1990), a section entitled 'Les accusations de Tante Colette', the protagonist Fanny is confronted by her maternal aunt who, via a bizarre mixture of rhetoric and insult, attempts to enlighten her as to some of the reasons for her ostracism by the family:

Mais qu'es-tu donc, toi? Qu'es-tu donc aujourd'hui? Comment définir clairement ce que tu es? Es-tu quelque chose? Es-tu seulement quelqu'un dont on puisse dire précisément: elle est ainsi, de telle région, son origine est celle-là? Faut-il croire que tu n'es rien de dicible? (*EF*, 155)

Quite apart from the comical ferocity of her attack and its expression, Tante Colette's strange series of 'questions' is notable for the way it situates Fanny as a defendant charged not with a failure to explain *who* she is but *what* she is. The Kafkaesque aunt-judge has little interest in finding out about the personal particularities that make Fanny truly Fanny, but is committed to a discourse that seeks to frame the young woman only in terms of objectifying identifications, ultimately condemning her for her failure to fit into its system of dehumanizing classification. I want to suggest that Marie NDiaye herself, in her capacity as a somehow 'ungraspable' French cultural figure, has been subjected to precisely those procedures of attempted objectification from which Fanny suffers at the hands of her family. While not always necessarily injurious in their tone or content – on the contrary, the terms in which NDiaye is encased are often dizzyingly effusive – the structures used to present her as both woman and writer nevertheless

deploy considerable violence in both their oversimplifying intensity and internal contradictions. The end result is a public figure who might well be described as the ultimate poster-girl for a ‘postmodern’ era in which the subject has been ‘decentred’, and ‘identity’ is old hat. And yet NDiaye’s seeming inability to be coherently represented by the signs and symbols at the disposal of the French culture from which she emerged, a culture that prides itself on its seemingly intrinsic lucidity and politicization, provides us with a potential source for her writing’s alliance of paradox and blankness.

The story of NDiaye’s birth in Pithiviers in 1967 to ‘un père sénégalais’ and ‘une mère beauceronne’ is generally well known, not least because this strangely precise information is so often given in the opening sentences of articles and interviews with the author.⁴ While there is, of course, nothing reprehensible about precision when it comes to situating a writer in her biographical context, it is nevertheless interesting to note the frequency and insistence with which the bodies and origins of NDiaye’s parents and grandparents are evoked, despite the fact that NDiaye herself was born and grew up in France (she spent her childhood and adolescence in the Parisian suburb of Bourg-la-Reine with her teacher mother and her elder brother, the historian and sociologist Pap Ndiaye).⁵ From the outset, the need to situate NDiaye, to make clear *what she is*, quietly suggests itself. However innocent or well-intentioned the information provided may be, it sets out, I suggest, to answer two unstated questions: if this author is ‘really’ French, why is her skin brown and, if she is ‘really’ French, why does she have that strange surname? It is not that these questions are necessarily offensive in themselves. More troubling is the fact that the questions are never directly posed as such. They hover, spectre-like, behind the surfeit of biographical information offered, designed, perhaps, to produce an ‘Oh, so *that’s* it!’ response in the reader or listener, while never acknowledging the nature of the query the listener may (or may not) have had in the first place. The information offers itself as relief for a racialized anxiety that has never been diagnosed as such and, what is worse, fails to provide much relief, since we are still none the wiser about what NDiaye really ‘is’.

NDiaye herself has always been at pains, at least in interviews, to stress her affiliation to her mother’s land, that is, to provincial France:

Je suis née dans un milieu, dans une famille, extrêmement ordinaires et même populaires puisque les parents de ma mère étaient agriculteurs. Toutes mes vacances d’enfant je les ai passées dans un village de la Beauce, dans des intérieurs typiquement populaires français [...] La

campagne beauceronne est une campagne vraiment âpre et dure. Mais c'est celle qui m'a formée, qui a modelé en grande partie mon esprit. (Argand, 2001)

NDiaye's parents separated when she was aged one, and subsequent contact with her father was minimal. Discussing the first trip she made to her father's country, Senegal, aged twenty, NDiaye states: 'Je me suis sentie étrangère [dans ce pays-là]. Je n'ai pas de double culture, c'est malheureux, mais en même temps je n'ai pas souffert du déchirement qui va souvent de pair' (Payot, 1996). It has been important to NDiaye to insist on the absence of any meaningful connection to her father's country, and one can certainly understand why. Not only is it indisputable that she never knew her father or his world, but this fact is called into question by those seeking to 'other' NDiaye inappropriately, either by assuming because of the way she looks and what she is called that she *must* know something about her 'roots', or, just as bizarrely, by reading (or, rather, hallucinating) exotic styles and themes in early texts such as *La Femme changée en bûche* and *La Sorcière*.⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that NDiaye, especially in her younger years, felt compelled to elaborate on the truth of her Frenchness in a somewhat over-compensatory manner. In an essay entitled 'Mon quatrième roman', she carefully explains, once again, the all-important details about her Gallic upbringing:

Élevée en France, n'ayant pas de contact avec ma famille sénégalaise, uniquement avec celle de ma mère, famille on ne peut plus traditionnelle et typique, j'étais, je me sentais exclusivement Française [...] À l'étranger je ressens très fortement mon appartenance complète, amoureuse, à la culture française, aux paysages français. Je le ressens dans l'absence de la France, sans nostalgie mais avec une sorte d'attendrissement au souvenir de tout ce que j'aime en France et qui m'a formée essentiellement. Je ne me sens ni cosmopolite ni d'une double culture, ce qui, à divers points de vue, serait plus intéressant, mais principalement l'héritière culturelle de Molière, de Rousseau ou de Proust [...] [J]e suis exclusivement Française. (NDiaye, 1997a: 65–8)⁷

Even ten years later, when questions of 'difference' threaten to creep up in an interview, NDiaye is quick to thwart any attempt by the interviewer to impose an 'othering' label on her. 'Je n'arrive pas à me voir, moi, comme une femme noire', she told me in 2007 (Asibong and Jordan, 2009: 199), despite my open question about attitudes to 'race' not, in fact, having asked for any such self-definition.

What I find more intriguing – and crucial for my understanding of the emphasis on blankness I find throughout her writing – is NDiaye’s insistence, again often before the question has even been asked, that her cultural and bio-political situation has made her in no way vulnerable to the potential pain of unwanted racialization. On the rare occasion that she does acknowledge an imposed sense of difference, NDiaye prematurely squashes the notion that this feeling could possibly be construed as painful: ‘Je ressens l’étrangeté [...] en tant que métisse, mais pas d’une manière douloureuse, d’une manière objective’. Earlier in the same interview, she is categorical about her absolute removal from suffering: ‘Je n’ai pas enduré grand-chose’ (Argand, 2001). The emotional experience of being considered black in a white-dominated society emerges, for NDiaye, as a truly imponderable phenomenon. It was only after reading her brother’s book about the ‘black condition’, NDiaye claims, that she began, aged forty, to ponder the subject of racism for the first time:

Je ne m’étais jamais posée cette question avant de le lire et qu’il m’en parle. Oui, je m’y intéresse de plus en plus et en même temps je me sens un peu étrangère à cette problématique car je suis dans une situation tellement originale que je ne peux absolument pas me plaindre de quoi que ce soit [...] Je ne me sens pas du tout visée par les problèmes que de nombreux Noirs rencontrent, même si ces problèmes sont réels. (Kapriélian, 2009: 32)

Pap Ndiaye confirms his sister’s expressed attitude of surprise at his burgeoning interest in issues of skin colour (he eventually wrote the sociological work *La Condition noire: essai sur une minorité française* in 2008, a book for which Marie contributed the short story ‘Les Sœurs’). The subject had apparently, for her, remained ‘livresque’, never, in the words of Pap, to be ‘appréhendé de façon émotionnelle ou intime’ (Boltanski, 2007). NDiaye would appear to offer a perfect mimicry of the Republican, anti-*communautariste* French subject, whose interest in the petty agendas of special interest groups and peculiar subcultures is precisely nil.⁸

NDiaye’s public statements have, from the beginning of her career, and apparently long before, then, combined to create a declaration of not only unstigmatized national belonging, but also a most definite non-belonging to any potential identity of blackness, not even of a hybrid, purely political, ‘strategic’ or otherwise deconstructed variety. But could it be that there are two or more Marie NDiayes, and that their respective positions on such issues are in bizarre contradiction

with one another? The language and tone NDiaye adopts in order to stress both the authenticity of her Frenchness and the painlessness of her experience seems at times to parody that of Fanny in the novel *En famille*, a character whose vain determination to prove that she belongs non-problematically to her maternal grandmother's provincial village is in fact the source of much of that novel's sadistic humour. Fanny's insistence on her ordinariness is delusional, flying in the face of endless, indisputable, often cartoonish experiences of exclusion, humiliation and betrayal. Later protagonists such as Nadia (in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, 2007) and Victoire (in 'Les Sœurs', 2008) will cling in an even more pathological fashion to a crumbling fantasy of painless integration, fighting off would-be-helpful friends and neighbours who seek to bear witness to their racialized injury as if they were particularly repulsive crows. NDiaye is clearly, as a writer, acutely aware of the phenomenon of 'blinking out' an experience of pain that would otherwise be intolerable. As the narrator of *Ladivine* (2013), refracted through the consciousness of the increasingly split-off and mythomaniacal little girl Malinka, so disingenuously puts it, 'même incolore une princesse ne saurait mentir' (*L*, 27). NDiaye's public statements, however, reproduce precisely the positions of blankness which her art seems committed to pulling apart.

A Blank Star is Born: NDiaye's Brilliant Career

If it has clearly been important for at least one of NDiaye's selves to insist upon its smooth assimilation into national structures and institutions, that particular self has been assisted in its endeavour by not only a string of superlative literary accomplishments but also a career trajectory that has made of 'Marie NDiaye' the epitome of a certain kind of cultural brilliance. Much of her instantly mythical status in the French literary world of the late 1980s was in no small measure connected to the extreme precocity of her emergence. Her first novel, *Quant au riche avenir*, was published in 1985 by the avant-garde publishing house Les Éditions de Minuit (publishers of Samuel Beckett, Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet), when she was just seventeen years old. According to the legend, Minuit's director Jérôme Lindon went in person to find NDiaye at her *lycée* (the Lycée Lakanal in the Parisian suburb of Sceaux) to ask her to sign the contract, so taken was he with the talent that oozed from the pages of that manuscript and its strange

story of a lonely schoolboy, 'le jeune Z'.⁹ NDiaye's writing, not unlike young Z's impeccable Latin prose translations, was hailed, from the outset, as structurally, stylistically and linguistically sublime. Pierre Lepape wrote in *Le Monde*:

Marie NDiaye utilise avec un brio confondant la langue, la lancinante phrase classique, polie, chantournée, docile pour peu qu'on sache la maîtriser à toutes les hésitations, apte à ramasser dans ses méandres les infinies variations du sentiment et les développements les plus subtils de la proposition logique. (Lepape, 1985)

Meanwhile, Michèle Bernstein gushed from the review pages of *Libération*:

Je m'en veux – nonobstant ne le faut-il pas? – d'insister sur l'âge tendre de l'auteur. Nous ne sommes pas au cirque, l'ombre de Minou Drouet ne flotte pas sur les tirages. Ce n'est pas non plus la projection poétique et visionnaire du génie adolescent incontrôlable, incontrôlé (suivez mon regard). La recherche maniaque de rigueur dans le style et de précision dans la pensée indique plutôt un talent adulte précocement mûri, avec ce je ne sais quoi en plus qui n'est pas encore fané. (Bernstein, 1985)

From the start, then, NDiaye was feted by the French literary establishment as an indisputable prodigy whose claim to genius was not only legitimate but beyond all fault and qualification, and certainly beyond any potentially insulting reflections on her sex, social class or 'race'. As Lydie Moudileno (1998) has pointed out, Minuit's predilection for almost entirely blank white covers and no authorial information whatsoever certainly helped in 'dematerializing' NDiaye, removing all traces of a physicality which might otherwise have hampered the institutional construction of a bodiless and socially de-contextualized 'pur esprit'.¹⁰ NDiaye's literary strategy during the 1980s and 1990s was, according to Sarah Burnautzki (2013a: 155), 'marquée par un jeu esthétique astucieux de dissimulation et de dévoilement de différences ethniques fidèle au dogme républicain de l'indifférence à la couleur'. It was NDiaye's skill in playing this game, suggests Burnautzki, that allowed her literary consecration by the Parisian establishment, but also facilitated – I would add – a relative obscurity in those early years: adored by the critics of *Le Monde*, *Libération* and even *Le Figaro*, NDiaye's tasteful gifts of apparently universalizable anxiety were nevertheless largely unrecognizable to the general public.

Following a prestigious Académie Française bursary in 1987 to study at the Villa Medici in Rome, NDiaye published a string of novels,

each receiving greater critical acclaim than the last, the only possible exception to the uninterrupted stream of encomia being reserved for her second novel *Comédie classique* (1987), its stylistic bravura – it consisted of a single, one-hundred-page-long sentence – being felt in some quarters to smack of arrogance. In general terms, though, NDiaye has, since 1985, been hailed as an almost supernaturally charming storyteller and stylistician, a literary ‘sorcière’ (Harang, 2004) or ‘sirène’ (Lepape, 2001), who holds in her possession a magical talent for creating narrative intrigues that positively gleam with mordant wit and keen social observation. Quoting another breathless reviewer, Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Christiane Makward note, in their significantly entitled *Dictionnaire littéraire de femmes de langue française, de Marie de France à Marie NDiaye*, that NDiaye’s is a ‘talent incroyablement précoce, incroyablement libre, plaisant, assuré, qui mélange tous les genres – roman anglais, conte philosophique, mélo familial – avec une virtuosité confondante [...] maîtrise invraisemblable pour un écrivain de 23 ans’ (Cottenet-Hage and Makward, 1996: 433). According to Bertrand Leclair,

L’écriture avait la pureté cristalline de la belle langue française, puisant sa respiration aux chefs d’œuvres du XVI^{ème} siècle (Mme de Sévigné, Mme de Lafayette) pour installer un imaginaire que, déjà, l’on pouvait deviner d’autant plus singulier qu’il en appelait à la plus grande lucidité. Et ce n’était qu’un début. Seize ans plus tard, au printemps 2001, alors qu’elle n’avait encore que 33 ans mais déjà sept livres derrière elle, un magazine littéraire dérogeait à toutes ses règles: dans la double page qui ouvre systématiquement chacun de ses numéros sur ‘l’avis des libraires’, permettant à cinq d’entre eux d’élire un livre différent et de le commenter, les cinq invités avaient tous élu le même, *Rosie Carpe*. (Leclair, 2009)

NDiaye went on, in a succession of dazzling literary accomplishments, to prove herself as truly the best in show. Her monumental *Rosie Carpe* (2001) would go on to win the prestigious Prix Femina, whilst in 2009, at the age of forty-two, her critical canonization would at last be matched by public popularity and commercial success, when she was awarded France’s most coveted literary prize, the Prix Goncourt, for her book *Trois femmes puissantes*, which went on to be the highest-selling novel in French that year, shifting a remarkable 450,000 copies (Aissaoui and Guiou, 2010). At the time of writing, four international conferences (in France, in Germany and two in the UK), and three edited volumes of academic writing (Asibong and Jordan, 2009; Bengsch and Ruhe, 2013; Motte and Moudileno, 2013) have been devoted to the

investigation of her work, whilst her emigration in 2007 to Berlin with her husband, the writer Jean-Yves Cendrey, and their three children was the subject of serious political polemic in France (an event on which I shall elaborate in a moment). The inclusion of *Papa doit manger* into the Comédie-Française's repertory in 2003 (she was only the second woman in history to be accorded that honour), her winning of the Académie Française's Grand Prix du Théâtre in 2012 and her nomination for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013 (she is the youngest writer ever to be shortlisted), together with her increasing public exposure (the release of her novel *Ladivine* in February 2013 was heralded on the front page of the national daily newspaper *Libération*), have combined with the success of the novels and plays themselves to give her a strong claim to the title of most celebrated French literary figure of her generation.

But Marie NDiaye is not a straightforward French 'national treasure', however much a narrative such as the one I have constructed above may suggest that she is. Nor, as Lydie Moudileno (2009) points out, is she 'n'importe quel honnête homme français', a formulation whose applicability to herself NDiaye insists upon in her 1997 essay 'Mon quatrième roman'. It is in the various cracks and fissures within these stories of acceptance and normality that we must look if we are to understand better the socio-political context of the blankness that seeps from so many of her protagonists. A spectre hovers over NDiaye's exemplary ordinariness, and this spectre shows itself with reasonable regularity. The most spectacular example of NDiaye's spectral 'othering' is the bizarre series of public quarrels that took place between her and various French politicians, via the French media, in November 2009, shortly after she won the Prix Goncourt for her novel *Trois femmes puissantes*. Having been alerted to the fact that, in an interview with the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* in August of that year, NDiaye had described Nicolas Sarkozy's France as 'monstrueuse' and had deplored the 'atmosphère de flicage, de vulgarité' (Kaprièlian, 2009), Eric Raoult, the right-wing *député* for Seine-Saint-Denis, called upon the French government to censure the writer, claiming that as a Goncourt winner she had a duty to represent France in a positive light and to exercise what he termed 'un devoir de réserve'. The entire affair was deeply peculiar, its various twists and turns getting reported on the television and radio and on the front pages of many of the dailies in France for several consecutive days. While the minister for culture, Frédéric Mitterrand, refused to condemn Raoult's strange action, several major political figures from the left, including Martine Aubry, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Ségolène

Royal, as well as eighty prominent writers, rallied to NDiaye's defence, insisting upon her right to exercise free speech in whatever critique of the regime she liked.

The grotesquely racialized dimensions of Raoult's attack on NDiaye (not to mention the numerous online commentators who wrote of the need for Mme NDiaye to 'retourner chez elle au Sénégal' if she was not in favour of France's regime) were rarely discussed in public, though. An important exception was Bertrand Delanoë (2009), writing on his blog: the left-wing mayor of Paris wondered why Raoult felt the need to mention the footballer Lilian Thuram and the tennis player Yannick Noah in the same breath as NDiaye when expanding on the reasons for his patriotic outrage. Surely, mused Delanoë, Raoult could not be implying that the three French-born public figures were comparable in their shamefully treacherous negativity vis-à-vis France because they were all 'black'?¹¹ The Raoult–NDiaye controversy burned out within a few days of course, but Raoult's attack serves as a shockingly visible symbol of just how vulnerable the 'assimilation' of Jérôme Lindon's brilliant young *protégée* into a universal, colour-blind Frenchness really was. In many ways the tenor of his discourse – supported by thousands of bloggers – mimicked the 'accusations de Tante Colette' laid out by NDiaye with such nightmarish precision in *En famille*: 'Tu sèmes le trouble dans notre famille, ce que nulle famille, tu le sais, n'est tenue d'accepter' (*EF*, 150). NDiaye's own response to the force of the attack was far more spirited than that of poor Fanny, but comes across, as usual, with a characteristically 'unemotional' objectivity. Asked whether she was surprised and affected by the polemic, she responded: 'Surprise par les propos d'Eric Raoult, qui dépassent en ridicule tout ce qu'on peut imaginer, oui. Affectée, non' (Leménager, 2009).

Throughout this book I argue that NDiaye's work explores the violence done to the subject's capacity for *feeling* and *knowing*. This violence is carried out by systems which muddle and split the subject beyond a point s/he can reasonably tolerate. The much-discussed cruelty at the heart of NDiaye's work (cf. Samoyault, 1999; Rabaté, 2013a) may be read, I suggest, as the recurring symptom of what it means to have one's life split into non-cohering sections; to be repeatedly stripped of the complexity of one's 'true' self, but to be actively complicit in that stripping; to be constantly 'blinking out' humiliating experiences that demand to be spoken, yet at the same time to be drawing attention to them obsessively, in a double-movement of affirmation and denial. NDiaye's work has, from the outset,

emphasized the strangeness of a splitting that cannot be acknowledged as such. Her protagonists oscillate chaotically between different states of having and not having, recognition and non-recognition, integration and exclusion. And their oscillations invariably lead them to a place in which they no longer feel anything at all, *in which they become simply blank*. Donald Winnicott (1969) suggests that identifying as ‘nothing’ becomes, in infancy, the self’s ultimate defence against a caregiver’s insistence on causing various kinds of unmanageable ‘muddle’ in his or her representation of reality. For Harry Guntrip, meanwhile, the only way, for many people, to cope with intolerable experiences of what he terms “‘in and out’ oscillation’ is ‘to escape from it into detachment and loss of feeling’ (1968: 48). My own intention is neither to celebrate nor to pathologize the subject’s multiple strategies for psychic survival but rather to explore the myriad aesthetic implications of how NDiaye’s paradoxes get converted into literary and theatrical forms of *glittering blankness*, constantly reflecting on their own zones of dissimulation. Like her various protagonists, the public NDiaye is constantly masking and unmasking different versions of what she claims to know and not know, to feel and not feel. Sometimes the act of revelation and concealment seems playful and banal; at others, especially in more politically charged contexts, it seems irresponsible and almost offensive. Whatever the truth of the ‘real’ NDiaye’s knowledge or feeling, NDiaye in her capacity as artist is able to take emotional and epistemological paradox to unprecedented heights of fascination.

Le travail du négatif: Psychodynamics of the Need to not Know

The approaches I have found to combine most productively with NDiaye’s worlds of denial and obfuscation are generally psychotherapeutic in perspective.¹² Psychoanalytic psychotherapy, especially those branches of it that focus on the traumatized subject’s need to ‘split off’ those parts of itself that are too painful to hold in consciousness, has generated fascinating accounts of the different ways in which we wrap intolerable psychic and/or physical perception in clouds of dead, unfeeling nothingness. A brief analysis of some of NDiaye’s most nullified characters reveals that a reading of their various flights into blankness bears interesting fruit from juxtaposition with the greatest psychotherapeutic thinkers of psychic negation.

A character like Nadia, the middle-aged narrator of the novel *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (2007), becomes easier to understand if we consider her need to deny the various forms of catastrophe that bubble beneath the surface of her life in the light of Freud's writings on the so-called defensive process. Freud focuses his analysis of 'splitting-off' on those he labels as 'fetishists', those male 'perverts' who create new systems of sexuality in order to distract themselves from their terrible observation that women, penis-less as they are, have apparently been castrated. Freud suggests that 'perverted' subjects engage in psychic processes of *disavowal* in order to cope with the intolerable knowledge of a loss they think they risk. One part of the 'perverted' subject's psyche acknowledges and accepts rationally that women have no penis and never did have one, while another part of the same psyche insists on creating a fetish that will make up for the hallucinated loss. This fetishistic part of the subject refuses the fact of sexual difference (a difference which, for various reasons, it finds traumatic) and instead insists, in a quasi-fantastical attempt to defend itself from anxiety, on an approach to (sexual) life that is predicated on negation. As Susan Rubin Suleiman (2010: 104) points out, Freud's analysis of the 'fetishist's' defensive system of disavowal is perhaps less interesting for its reflections on the psychic and physical phenomena of sexual difference than for its elaboration of a subjectivity that turns to denial in order to preserve it from the pain of real or hallucinated loss. NDiaye's Nadia lives her life within such a system of refusal. Hers is a mode of existence predicated on the silent dissimulation and replacement of all the various traumatic elements of her past and present experience, elements that could be described, in Freudian terms, as forms of both real and hallucinated castration. In his original article on 'splitting', Freud (1938) refers to the *artfulness* of the fetishist. And Nadia is indeed artful in her various conversions of anxiety and loss into empty simulacra of personal contentment and socio-political privilege, facades which all depend for their flimsy shadow-existence on the blanking out of unfortunate realities: a working-class (and probably non-white) family background; a sudden and apparently inexplicable exclusion from bourgeois Bordeaux; a queer and hateful grown-up son. Hers is the supreme artfulness of the defensive blank. It is the breakdown of Nadia's various processes of *knowing and yet not knowing* with regard to the traumatic phantoms lurking behind her initially polished account of herself that forms the subject of *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, a novel which, in many ways, acts out a fantastically psychotherapeutic 'coming-to-

terms' (via the inter-uterine growth and delivery of an unnameable black creature) with the buried truth of denied trauma.

As we explore the various ways in which NDiaye's protagonists attempt to avoid the pain of emotional knowledge, we discover fascinating overlaps with some of the twentieth century's most exciting thinkers of denial. We are in no way obliged to remain in the sexual (and ultimately normative) domain of Freud. Wilfred Bion's writings explore the different directions in which the mind can travel as it opens itself up to (or, conversely, closes itself down against) the knowledge and the truth of its own psychic reality. Using the term 'K' to describe the capacity to experience the knowledge that comes from exposure to real emotional experience, Bion uses the opposite term, '*minus K*', to convey 'not just ignorance but the active avoidance of knowledge, or even the wish to destroy the capacity for it' (Parsons, 2000: 49). NDiaye's texts illuminate methods – and, crucially, socio-political contexts – involved in the cultivation of a lifestyle and mindset predicated on the blankness of *minus K*. Bion's account of potential psychic change is especially useful when we attempt to give words to the trajectories of NDiaye's later protagonists, characters who *do* seem to develop a capacity for moving, even if only for a miraculous instant, to a place beyond blank disavowal. Figures like the anguished mixed-race lawyer Norah in the opening story of *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009), or the celebrated novelist narrator of *Autoportrait en vert* (2005) are both privileged with (or assaulted by) wild flashes of unstoppable *K*. It descends upon them against their will, taking various forms: hot streams of embarrassing urine (Norah), or the terrified sighting of an unnameable 'forme sombre' (*Autoportrait en vert*). These encounters with *K* may be experienced by the characters involved as anything but pleasant, but they convey the sense of a non-negotiable psychic propulsion *forwards* in the NDiayan oeuvre. NDiaye's later writing seems increasingly capable of 'containing' – to use another Bionian concept – the cathartic horror of its protagonists' uncomfortable brushes with *K*. These later works display the same drive towards emotional transformation that can be felt when reading Bion himself, for whom 'learning from experience' is the one activity the human being needs to discover if s/he is to avoid the zombified numbness of psychic stagnation.

The vast majority of characters in both NDiaye's novels and plays, however, never come close to learning from experience, or indeed to anything resembling emotional growth, tending instead to disintegrate in a messy morass of Freudian fetishism and Bionian *minus K*. The

eponymous heroine of *Rosie Carpe*, constantly unsure who or what she actually is, frequently unable to access emotions, sensations and memories, and veering unnervingly between feelings of complete non-existence and an intoxicating experience of herself as preternaturally powerful, brilliantly illustrates Donald Winnicott's preoccupation with the 'false self that hides the true self, that complies with demands, that reacts to stimuli, that rids itself of instinctual experiences by having them, but that is only playing for time' (1958: 304–5). Rosie emerges from a vague and forgotten childhood as a fully fledged nonentity, ignored, acted upon, manipulated, but also uncannily shifting and adapting (like her parents, but somehow less powerfully) to new, frequently abusive situations, silently complying with their often intolerable demands. Rosie appears to have no inner sense of herself as a real person, nor is she able to take an ethical position within a given predicament, no matter how urgent the circumstances.

Other protagonists in NDiaye do not go through such a dizzying array of 'false selves', but their capacity for emotional response to a traumatic situation is instead obscured by an all-consuming *vagueness*. Herman, the passive, melting protagonist of *Un temps de saison* (1994) and Lucie, the blandly agreeable narrator of *La Sorcière* (1996), are such protagonists, their psychic (non-) responses to various trials of social and familial alienation and loss being more accurately described, rather than via reference to the Winnicottian 'false self', in Peter L. Giovacchini's term of 'blank self'. Giovacchini investigates subjects who '[use] blankness as a defense against [...] underlying rage and self-hatred (as well as to demand magical salvation)' (1972a: 376). Comparing such characters to Helene Deutsch's (1934) notion of the 'as-if personality', Giovacchini provides a fascinating analysis of the frustration inherent in any attempt to construct relationships with people who are not 'really' there:

I couldn't find an anchor upon which to organize my understanding [...] of these patients. I felt there was nothing I could 'grab hold off' [*sic*] – that there was nothing to analyze. I felt a void within myself when I tried to view each patient in terms of unconscious processes and defense mechanisms [...] My patients, however, were perfectly composed and relaxed and (on the surface at least) did not appear defensive. Although there seemed to be a paucity of analytic material (transference projections), my patients were not boring. I had the distinct impression that I was being confronted with a baffling phenomenon, but one that might eventually be understood in analytic terms. (Giovacchini, 1972a: 371)

Arriving at the conclusion that these people have developed ‘blank selves’ not only as responses to aggressive and/or neglectful parenting but also to screen off disavowed hatred of their own children, Giovacchini offers rich material for further investigation of the blankness of protagonists such as Herman and Lucie, who greet the disappearance of their variously gaseous and crow-converted children into the ether with a characteristically muted response. His ‘blank self’ is the political and familial hook upon which NDiaye’s ungraspable tableau of ‘nothing characters’ is hung.

Blankness/*Blancness*: Skins, Stigmata, Shame

There are, then, a number of psychotherapeutic models we can use to probe NDiaye’s protagonists in order to gain greater insight into their propensity towards the blankness of not knowing. However, we need to develop these psyche-based observations while bearing in mind the socio-political context within which her texts are created. Her repeated analyses of dissociation and self-erasure also cry out to be approached from the perspective of the minority subject’s experience of stigmatization, especially in its racialized form. In a bizarre and fascinating passage from his article ‘The Unconscious’, Freud himself appears to racialize the problem of anxious fantasy. Attempting to describe unconscious fantasy formations, he bewilderingly declares:

We may compare them with individuals of mixed race who, taken all round, resemble white men, but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other, and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges of white people [...] To this species belong the fantasmatic formations of normal men as well as neurotics, in whom we have recognized the preliminary degrees of the formation of the dream and the symptom. (Freud, 1915: 191)

NDiaye’s writing, thoroughly saturated as it is with the vexed questions of ‘mixed-ness’, ‘striking features’, exclusion and neurosis, might be seen as the ultimate literary response to Freud’s underdeveloped simile. If her protagonists are characterized by their need blankly to negate, this tendency usually takes place in tandem with an unshakable sense of themselves as ‘marked’, excessively and hatefully recognizable as a member of a shameful social category with which they seek no association and to which they are, in any case, only distantly

connected. The hateful social mark becomes the unavoidable horizon against which the NDiayean protagonist's drive towards the fantasy of total blankness must be viewed, even if more 'universal' contexts of traumatized infancy and familial haunting (of which more later) remain equally pressing.

NDiaye's short story 'Les Sœurs' (2008) serves as the most explicit exploration of a racializing trauma to which she alludes in enigmatic form throughout her œuvre. Through the character of Victoire, NDiaye explores how a subject's movement towards psychic blankness serves as a defence against an ideological procedure of corporeal objectification. The dark-skinned Victoire, constantly misrecognized, over-simplified, categorized and labelled by her lazy peers as 'black', despite her mixed parentage and exemplary, smiling assimilation, develops a social persona that enjoys success and eventual popularity, but which is, as her admirer Bertini discovers in horror, both impenetrable and strangely robotic:

[O]h, se dit Bertini désespéré, ce n'était qu'artifice, jeu social, stratégie d'évitement [...] Elle avait été contrainte de jouer et de dissimuler bien au-delà de ce qu'on peut raisonnablement admettre. Elle était devenue une femme implacable et sévère, sous ses dehors amènes, et en quelque sorte inaccessible. (SO, 14)

Victoire's peculiarly strategic falseness is, NDiaye's narrator suggests via Bertini's interpretation, a behavioural disposition that she has devised for coping with a social situation of corporeal over-exposure that is simply intolerable and on which she is, perhaps, at some level, reflecting 'sans cesse' (SO, 14). Unable to find meaning in a black identity, Victoire is not in a position, unlike her light-skinned but paranoid sister Paula, to 'pass' as white. Her solution is to dwell in a realm of resolutely non-representational, smilingly ignorant, would-be 'post-racial' blankness, not unlike the various forms of negation we have already discussed, but with the specific function of blanking out the traumatic evocation of racialized difference.¹³

Playing on the English word 'blackness' and the French 'blanc' (meaning both 'white' and 'blank'), I would like to propose a new word for Victoire's attempted attainment of absolutely 'post-racial' being: *blancness*. *Blancness* is the typically NDiayean state, most often achieved only provisionally or else in fantasy, of being no longer recognizable as a racialized minority. While mere 'blankness' tends to replicate the Freudian, Bionian, Winnicottian or Giovacchinian forms I have already discussed, *blancness* is a phenomenon specific to

those who are recognizably racialized as minority subjects and who are attempting to evade this unwelcome (mis)recognition. *Blancness* is always a symptom of an unwelcome racialization, though it need not necessarily be expressed in terms of ‘black’ and ‘white’. Indeed, it rarely is represented thus. In *En famille*, Fanny’s *blancness* is the ‘new and improved’ appearance she attains after her first death, during which some people seem no longer to notice her ‘singularité’. In *Un temps de saison*, Herman’s *blancness* is his shaky sense of the possibility of integration into the blond village community in which he unexpectedly finds himself following his family’s disappearance. In *Mon cœur à l’étroit*, Nadia’s *blancness* is embodied in the normative niche she and her husband Ange occupy in bourgeois Bordeaux prior to their inexplicable persecution. The problem, of course, is that the (un)comfortably numb condition of *blancness* can neither last for long nor, in an obsessively racializing society, be truly post-racial. As Bertini so annoyingly points out, Victoire *does* experience racism: he has seen it. And while she is prepared, in the story’s one miraculous moment of ‘non-blank’ communication, to acknowledge that painful fact, it is not an acknowledgment she is ready to repeat or to integrate into an everyday narrative about herself. She would prefer to flee: from Bertini, from the possibility of intimacy, from the very pages of this awkward little parable about actually *feeling* black.

Victoire’s response to Bertini’s well-meaning observation can usefully be read with reference to Giorgio Agamben’s account of shame and the human subject. Considering the case of an Italian student who *blushes* following his random selection for death at the hands of an SS officer, Agamben notes that ‘it is as if the flush on his cheeks momentarily betrayed a limit that was reached, as if something like a new ethical material were touched upon in the living being’ (1999: 104). The student cannot contain the shame of being designated in so violently intimate a way: the force of it overwhelms him, announces itself on his body, spreading out visibly on his cheeks. Agamben frames it brilliantly:

The ‘I’ is thus overcome by its own passivity [...] yet this expropriation and desubjectification is also an extreme and irreducible presence of the ‘I’ to itself. It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own. In shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This

double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame. (Agamben, 1999: 105–6)

These moments of radical shame are experienced as so intolerable for ‘marked’ NDiayean subjects such as Victoire that they far prefer to take refuge in fantasies of eternal blankness – and *blancness* – even if the consequence of this is isolation from all relationality. Fanny, the protagonist of *En famille* extends the hopeless attempt to avoid this feeling of racialized shame over hundreds of pages. One moment in particular, halfway through the novel, illustrates the vain hypocrisy of her attempted evasion especially well. Having returned to the familial village against the express orders of Tante Colette never to do so again, Fanny is staying as a paying guest at the hotel of a childhood friend named Isabelle. Finally recognizing Fanny after a short period of blankness, Isabelle’s husband recalls the abusive term that was used to designate her during their childhood, his insensitive repetition of which causes Fanny, ‘*tout empourprée de honte*’ (EF, 166; my emphasis), to hang her head over her coffee in a ‘douloureux silence’ (EF, 166).¹⁴

Texts such as ‘Les Sœurs’ and *En famille* are remarkable for the way in which they paint the emotional *and* ontological failure of NDiaye’s psychically *and* socio-politically ‘spoiled’ (cf. Goffman, 1963) protagonists with such nightmarish precision. Horrified at the world’s capacity to label them as something they justifiably do not accept that they are, these protagonists cling fast to the possibility of *blancness*, the political supplement to an already existing basic propensity towards blankness (disavowal, affectlessness, pretence) that has been inculcated in the familial dimensions of their relational existence. They simply cannot cope with the possibility of the Agambenian moment of shame. In *Ladivine* (2013), Clarisse/Malinka prefers to withdraw from all interaction with her teacher – and with education itself – rather than run the risk of being ‘outed’ as ‘black’ by the appearance of her mother:

Elle ne dit rien cependant, se contentant de hocher la tête avec son sérieux habituel.

Il en reparla une fois, elle hochait de nouveau la tête, jamais plus, par la suite, elle ne lèverait vers lui son visage avide d’approbation. (L, 39–40)¹⁵

NDiaye’s protagonists refuse, on the whole, to acknowledge the reality of shameful naming, even as their dark (or pale) cheeks continue visibly to burn. Fanny, for example, fails to take the opportunity offered her by a highly intelligent series of reflections uttered by her indescribably

'othered' fiancé Georges in the wake of his own intolerable experience of racialized shaming:

Je ne suis rien d'autre que moi, Georges, et je ne comprends rien aux noms dont on m'affuble, que j'entends susurrer quand je passe dans la grand-rue, et que pourtant je reconnais pour des noms ridicules et honteux [...] puisque je ne suis rien d'autre que moi, Georges, et que ces noms que j'entends sur mon passage sont vieux et convenus, ils n'ont pas été inventés pour moi qui suis contraint, cependant, quoique ébahi, d'accepter qu'ils me désignent [...] Mais je sens être Georges, tout simplement, ainsi que je me le répète chaque jour pour ne rien avoir à faire avec ces mots, dont, malheureusement, je devine le sens, car ce sont des mots connus, qu'on ne peut pas feindre de n'avoir jamais entendus ou de trouver plaisants.

– Quels sont-ils? demandai-je d'une voix légère, mais les joues empourprées, le front brûlant. (*EF*, 233–4)

The price that Fanny must pay for her faux-naive pact with both blankness and *blancness* is radical depersonalization, the renunciation of any possibility of intimacy with those who seek to discuss the phenomena with her, and, to top it off, fantastical disintegration. 'Shame-deniers' such as Fanny are almost always rejected by social, familial and legislative structures that have never believed in their precious, only ever provisional *blancness* in the first place, or else, like Malinka/Clarisse, who 'passes' successfully, they are unable to enter into anything resembling honest relationality. Perhaps the ultimate cruel irony is that these protagonists' anxious attachment to an always insecure *blancness* means that they can never properly enjoy the stupid, sleepy zombification that their 'unmarked' contemporaries take for granted. As the narrator of *La Femme changée en bûche* obsessively remarks, she will never be granted the 'ordinariness' of her empty-headed friend Valérie: no matter how far she advances in her career of blankness, she will always be prevented from falling into a truly blithe state of unrecognizability precisely because of the apparently visible stain she so troublingly carries.

It seems to me crucial, in this protracted discussion of Marie NDiaye's treatment of blankness, that we maintain an analysis that functions at several levels, acknowledging the 'universality' of the situations she describes while at the same time noticing the ways in which those situations accrue a vaguely obscene 'supplementary' level of specifically stigmatized anxiety. It is this politicized 'supplement' (one that is usually disavowed by NDiaye herself in interviews) that complicates most

existing psychoanalytic theories of psychic negation, and which makes NDiaye one of the most nuanced painters of twentieth- and twenty-first-century blankness, one who highlights the simultaneously private and public contexts of the self's anxious flight from visibility and representation. The 'supplement' weds blankness to *blancness*, illustrating how these two 'invisibilizing' phenomena work in tandem but also against one another. It is in the tension between the two strains of negation that the socially 'marked' subject is prevented from fully enjoying the 'pleasures' of blankness, but is also potentially saved from its totally zombifying implications.

Dead Parents: Familial Avatars of the 'Traumatizing' (Non-) Event

The colourless personalities of NDiaye's protagonists are founded, as we have seen, on a need to not know something about themselves. This desperation for ignorance is something NDiaye's various texts actively collude with. Her texts usually offer the reader just enough information to realise that something is being hidden or denied, but not quite enough to work out what 'it' is. The narratives themselves mimic the dead zones of the zombified characters' masked bodies, discourses and psyches. The holes at the heart of so many of NDiaye's texts operate not only at the level of character but also at the level of event. Events which may or may not have taken place leave gaps in the narrative every bit as disorientating as those reflected in the protagonists' disavowing dispositions. Textual blankness derives, in other words, not only from the way in which protagonists refuse to know things that they could know, but also from the way in which they are haunted by non-things that they can never know, no matter how hard they try. These non-things seem to be occluded events floating out of the past, spectral phenomena buried deep within the protagonists' family history and inter-generational psychopathology. We are no longer talking about the disavowal or repression of unpleasant or humiliating knowledge which the protagonists could, theoretically, allow themselves to know. No: the kind of haunting 'non-thing' we are now discussing is placed firmly out of the reach of both protagonist and reader. It belongs to the realm of the properly unknowable. The nature of this kind of haunting event, or non-event, is always difficult to conceptualize, as it is often so abstract, so close to something already formless, never properly born.

In the novel *Rosie Carpe*, Lagrand is driven to distraction by the nagging feeling that there was something that he was supposed to do but has forgotten. The uncertainty dances around his consciousness like a negative sprite, weighing on his brain in all its niggling absence: ‘Qu’aurait-il dû faire qu’il n’avait pas fait?’ (RC, 187) ... ‘[i]l se sentait brutalement coupable de tout’ (RC, 205). We later learn that Lagrand’s mother is psychotic, and decided long ago that he, her son, was responsible for her intolerable thoughts and feelings. In *Un temps de saison*, Herman is confounded by a mysterious absence that is absolutely not his fault: the supernatural dematerialization of his wife and child. As for *En famille*’s Fanny, while she may well be a psychological study in the ‘blacking out’ of things she could see and know if only she were a little stronger, she is also the victim of an impossibly murky familial past that she is trying in vain to understand. The family’s ‘history’ is, in fact, an ever-shifting set of half-baked stories and incomplete representations, whose various exclusions, erasures and unprovable acts of violence fill her with the sense of emptiness to which she will try to give form in the shape of the spectral Aunt Léda. Fanny, Herman and Lagrand are part of a larger community of NDiaye’s characters who are haunted by a sense of themselves as disintegrating, ‘undone’, riddled with blanks that are truly not of their making. Such protagonists and the narratives which bear them will eventually disintegrate under the violence of textual non-explication.

The family can usually be located as the source of all these unknowable blanks in the world of NDiaye. Already characterized by a series of affectless and indifferent individual members, the family is also defined by a set of non-locatable and unsolvable mysteries which hurt the suffering protagonist without her ever being able to identify the precise nature of the pain. One way of considering the feeling experienced by many of NDiaye’s protagonists, that they carry within them a ghostly ‘blank’ that seems to have been transmitted via a parental figure, is through the lens of André Green’s theory of the ‘dead’ mother. In Green’s vision, the subject’s early internalization of her caregiver’s emotional absence creates a propensity towards a lifelong sense of being haunted by something that is ‘there’, but not ‘there’. Green’s ‘dead’ mother has not actually died, but neither has she been able to create ‘living’ bonds with her infant, absorbed as she is during key sections of the child’s infancy by her own processes of blank mourning (1983: 222). The infant registers the mother’s withdrawal of interest, affection and affect, but also notes her continued material existence: physically

present, but psychically voided, the mother is now experienced by the infant as somehow 'dead', or perhaps more accurately as 'zombified', an only half-alive, pseudo-parental shell.¹⁶ According to Green, rather than developing a loving, hating or even manageably disillusioned rapport with her maternal object, the infant of the 'dead mother' develops a *blank* rapport with the lifeless imago she carries inside herself: Green speaks of a '*noyau froid*', 'qui sera ultérieurement dépassé mais qui laisse un marque indélébile sur les investissements érotiques des sujets en question' (1983: 230; his emphasis). Green expresses the (non-) affective mother–infant relationship in various terms, but perhaps his most striking formulation is that of the infant's hate-free 'murder' of the maternal object (1983: 231), which it silently 'buries' inside itself, cadaverous but still disgustingly alive, without a tombstone to symbolize the loss. The spectral presence has not been eliminated, of course, but lingers, disavowed, just beneath the surface of the growing infant's consciousness, into childhood, adolescence, and far beyond. The developing subject feels no love, then, and no hate either, just a dull, aching absence: this is the unbearable, negative, psychic (non-) weight, the painful hole, as it were, of the badly buried 'dead mother' (1983: 235).

Wherever we look in the world of NDiaye, we find mothers that André Green would indubitably describe as 'dead'. Consider any 'hole'-riddled, loveless protagonist hard enough, and her oddly vacant mother will usually be discernible, smiling pleasantly even as she slithers from her furious child's grasp. There is almost no point in making a list: it would include almost every single one of NDiaye's main characters. Lucie, *la sorcière*; the failed film star, Ève Brulard; Olga and René, the anorexic teenagers of 'Le Jour du Président' and 'Les Garçons' respectively, all display three or more of the classic hallmarks of 'dead mother children': obsessive, delusional, forgetful, shivering, permanently guilt-ridden, in constant search of physically induced affect, and drawn to absent, spectral, feminine and feminized love-objects. They also struggle with nightmarishly inaccessible mothers, many of whom fantastically 'turn' in the course of the narrative itself, becoming *different* in a way the child cannot quite put her finger on. When, after a long period of separation, Rosie Carpe unexpectedly encounters her mother one afternoon on the streets of Antony, it is the strange casualness of Danielle/Diane's 'Tiens, bonjour' (RC, 129) that first strikes the reader as uncanny. But the mother – and the world that mother has built around her – have, for Rosie, become overwhelmingly robotic, pallid and unreal. Mme

Carpe's hair has turned blond and she smells inexplicably of boxwood (RC, 131); the interiors of her house gleam with a 'blanc si insurpassable qu'il lui semblait être non pas le simple blanc mais la source même de tous les blancs possibles' (RC, 132); even her voice has been drained of colour, a 'voix blanche' (RC, 135). Rosie, already seriously disorientated by reality, and doubtful even of her own identity, is incapable of fully grasping this fantastically new mother, and is instead stunned into a quasi-infantile stupor, aware only that the unreadable parent she is now being confronted with is 'autre chose' (RC, 132).¹⁷ A novel written a decade earlier rehearses the same dynamic. Running randomly into her mother at the railway station over 100 pages after the painful familial quest of *En famille* has begun – 100 pages during which she has been abandoned, abused, excluded and raped twice (once by her maternal uncle) – Fanny is straightaway confronted with a strangely hurtful affability:

Hélas, ma petite fille, s'écria la mère en brandissant une valise écossaise, il faut que je me sauve, je prends l'avion dans une heure!

Mais jamais tu n'as pris l'avion, dit Fanny interloquée.

Oui, oui, mais c'est ainsi, aujourd'hui je prends l'avion [...] Au revoir, ma petite fille. Si je pensais te rencontrer là!

[...]

Quant à elle, Fanny n'eût pas souffert de ne la voir jamais revenir: sans le vouloir, sa mère lui avait causé jusqu'à ce jour moins de bienfaits que de désagréments, tant son indifférence était infinie. (EF, 126–8)

NDiaye's 'dead' mothers play a crucial role, then, in the author's all-consuming evocation of narrative and psychic blankness. Not only does their bloodless presence reinforce the kinds of denial and disavowal we have already considered at length (for they encourage their offspring to withdraw emotionally as much as they themselves have done), but they also exist, like Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's familial 'phantoms', as utterly unknowable 'non-events' in their own right, ontological embodiments of a blank secret to which the protagonists can never have access. In accordance with the theories of Abraham and Torok, NDiaye's heroines and heroes are afflicted by familial phantoms which are not the product of their own repressed complexes, but those of their mothers and fathers, and of their mothers and fathers before them:

La préoccupation d'abord contrôlée, puis délirante du patient semble l'effet d'une hantise fantomatique, issue de la tombe que recèle le

psychisme du père. Le délire du patient incarne ce fantôme et met en scène l'agitation verbale d'un secret enterré vif dans l'inconscient paternel [...] Le fantôme est une formation de l'inconscient qui a pour particularité de n'avoir jamais été consciente – et pour cause, – et de résulter du passage – dont le mode reste à déterminer – de l'inconscient d'un parent à l'inconscient d'un enfant [...] L'apparition du fantôme indiquerait donc les effets sur le descendant de ce qui avait eu, pour le parent, valeur de blessure, voire de catastrophe narcissique [...] Ajoutons qu'il est supporté par des mots occultés, autant de gnomes invisibles qui s'appliquent à rompre, depuis l'inconscient, la cohérence des enchaînements. (Abraham and Torok, 1987: 429–31)¹⁸

Add to the various 'dead' mothers and ancestral 'phantoms' a whole host of missing fathers, and it quickly becomes clear how the NDiayean protagonist does not have to go back very far in her family tree in her quest to discover why it may feel as if she is surrounded by blankness. In the world of NDiaye, the father is not only radically absent, he is also, if and when he turns up, every bit as 'dead' as his ex-wife, albeit in a rather less affable manner. The fathers of Fanny in *En famille*, the narrator in *Autoportrait en vert* and Norah in *Trois femmes puissantes* all display the same combination of extreme coldness, contempt and indifference towards their adult daughters. Not content with being physically absent for most of these women's lives, these fathers add to their daughters' already existing sense of emptiness by removing any possibility of emotional connection when the adult child actually makes the epic journey to visit them in their African (or, in the case of *En famille*, African-esque) home. The eponymous anti-hero of *Papa doit manger* positively revels in his refusal to inhabit the paternal function for any of his offspring, going so far as to specify the necessity of his youngest child's eradication if he, Papa, is to become the man he dreams of being. Meanwhile, the floating head of Rosie's spectral father, Francis, is the image with which NDiaye leaves the reader in the final sentence of *Rosie Carpe*. NDiaye reveals paternal 'deadness' to be every bit as crucial in the creation of the haunted and disintegrating subject's set of internalized blanks as its maternal counterpart.¹⁹ Many characters – one thinks of René, Lagrand, Malinka/Clarisse, or the variously spectral babies in *Rosie Carpe*, *Providence* and *Rien d'humain* – have no father at all, or, rather, their father could be literally anyone. For these characters, if they ever arrive in the world of action and speech, there can be a choice only between increasingly mad and dangerous quests for daddy – René will pay a particularly high price for the

sight of his father's face – and the horrid acceptance of an undeniable abandonment: 'Mon père s'est barré, dit-il tranquillement' (TMA, 104).

Holey Books: Fantastical Representations of Uncertainty

Fleeing Bordeaux in the early hours of the morning, Nadia, the narrator of NDiaye's 2007 novel *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, comes across an empty square that is brilliantly and inexplicably lit up: 'Cette abondance de surnaturel me tourne la tête. Une place vide à ce point illuminée – ah, dans quel but? me dis-je' (MCE, 191). I would like this image to represent the world of NDiaye. Her narratives are paradoxically glowing landscapes of ghostly kinship and spectral community, populated by disavowed trauma, unacknowledged stigma, blank selfhood and unknowable ancestry. This world of deathly emptiness is conveyed by language that is itself full of holes and hallucinations. As we have seen, her writing mimics the mechanisms of unconscious repression and foreclosed familial knowledge. In repeatedly evoking what is not there and cannot be found, NDiaye emphasizes the blank's importance, its centrality to psychic life itself, more intensely than any representation of the missing object possibly could. But it is her destabilization of the frontiers of realism that contributes particularly effectively to her creation of a world in which the information desired by the reader more than anything else is tantalizingly out of reach.

NDiaye makes use of nearly all the tools available to writers of the 'fantastic', that register of aesthetic creation in which, to paraphrase Todorov's (1970) canonical formulation, the reader is forced to *hesitate* before the reality of the world with which s/he is confronted. Her reader must hesitate for all kinds of 'fantastical' reasons: does the narrator of *La Femme changée en bûche* really – at least, within the intra-diegetic 'reality' of the text we are reading – have a personal relationship with the Devil, or is she psychotic? Does *En famille*'s Fanny really come back to life after she has been ripped apart by her cousin's dog? And, if so, has she really changed in some fundamental, quasi-physical manner, as several (though not all) of the other characters in the novel appear to think? Is Lucie really a witch, or is she just tired of being boring?²⁰ Have her daughters truly grown wings and flown away, or is she merely having a breakdown? Rare is the NDiaye text in which the reader does not have to ask herself such questions, even if the author's deployment of radically different modes of non-realism shifts from book to book

and from play to play.²¹ By producing a representational framework in which the reader or spectator must constantly question the validity of her own perceptions and interpretations, NDiaye reinforces with great effectiveness the feelings of anxiety, doubt and panic set in motion for the hapless protagonists by unlocatable non-events, disavowed absences and blankly mourned losses. When Ève Brulard sees herself multiplied and waiting for her at every street corner, all the while terrified by the spectral presence of her dead mother in the village mountain, the reader, at the mercy of 'fantastical' hesitation, is forced to experience the same dynamics of schizoid splitting.

The suspension of 'realism' at the aesthetic level thus allies with a forced recognition of blank haunting and disintegration at the psychic level. Trauma is embedded within a fantastically reconfigured framing of holey, unverifiable 'reality' (cf. Gaensbauer, 2009). But it is important to note that NDiaye's use of the fantastic conveys not only subjective and familial psychosis but also socio-politically constructed derangement. The lurching shifts of, in particular, racialized 'mad' experience are nightmarishly communicated via NDiaye's withholding of key information throughout her narratives. When, for example, we are not permitted to know whether Fanny's putative metamorphosis has gone unrecognized by her aunt Clémence because it has not 'actually' happened or because her aunt Colette and cousin Eugène are 'seeing things', NDiaye conveys a truth about the nature of the minority subject's racialized experience that is little discussed because majority discourse remains so stubbornly in the realms of so-called 'common sense'. For racialized perception is inherently fantasmatic. If one human is deemed by another to be 'different', it is perfectly possible that a third, differently pathological, human will not see that 'difference', indeed will not accept it as a 'real' criterion of discernment. Racism, while a system, can be experienced in a fantastically unsystematic manner. As Erving Goffman points out (1963), the stigmatized subject quickly becomes used to the 'strange' (yet everyday) experience of her stigma being received with contempt in one quarter, horror in another, and indifference in a third. Moreover, the same stigmatized subject can be perceived differently by the same non-stigmatized subject from one day to the next, depending on mood, circumstances and political context. To be stigmatized is an inherently uncanny experience, replete with doubt, hesitation, paranoia and faulty interpretations. NDiaye's habitual inscription of informational gaps or bewildering shifts in the perceptions or behaviour of characters responding to another's alleged

'difference' may be, for some readers, fantastical; for others it is, like the strange world of NDiaye itself, utterly quotidian.

The first chapter of this book considers the first cycle of NDiaye's novels, the books she published between 1985 and 1994. In this chapter, I trace the progression of writing which begins, in the early text *Quant au riche avenir*, by appearing to embody the values of French universalism, irreproachable style and 'blank perfection', but proceeds to stage its own particularized breakdown – via incursions into the marvellous, the fantastic and increasingly *tainted* subjectivity – at the same time as establishing itself as a truly singular body of work. In the second chapter, I move on to explore the second cycle of novels, texts published between 1996 and 2009, as well as considering aspects of *Ladivine* (2013), NDiaye's outlandish epic of canine protection and transgenerational shame, and the first novel published by NDiaye after winning the Prix Goncourt in 2009 for *Trois femmes puissantes*. This is the period during which NDiaye, transformed from 'cult' personality to mainstream literary star via a series of highly mediatized events (accolades, 'exile', rows), produced what is perhaps her finest work, *Rosie Carpe* (2001), and began to push her exploration of blankness in the direction of emotional recognition and healing as well as something occasionally resembling politicizable representation. The third chapter addresses NDiaye's theatre: six plays written between 1999 and 2011. While these theatrical works compress and intensify the themes of human eradication and erasure – facilitated by familial and social structures – already familiar from the prose fiction, they do so in an especially violent manner, as well as insisting on the need for a collective, perhaps revolutionary, response to the abusive dimensions of non-negotiable blankness. *Papa doit manger* (2003) managed to smuggle a black man, a mixed-race woman and two mixed-race girls onto the stage of the 323-year-old Comédie-Française within the context of one of the most bizarrely classical (and yet also baroque) French plays of recent times. What are the cultural implications of such publicly and spectacularly racialized representations of blank psychosis and abuse? The final chapter focuses on the question of the child, a figure who becomes increasingly important in the course of NDiaye's writing. Arguing that the child is, in her world, the ultimate stigmatized victim and the conduit *par excellence* through which pathological processes of deadening and erasure are channelled, I consider a number of 'minor' works (neither novels nor plays) published between 1999 and 2011

and often illustrated by drawings, paintings or photographs, in which NDiaye increasingly allows the child-figure the possibility of recognizing and representing itself on less glazed terms. Not unlike NDiaye's own trajectory from schoolgirl prodigy to *grand écrivain*, the path I trace in the course of this book has a vaguely redemptive feel to it. Let the reader judge for him or herself whether these yellow brick roads from blankness to recognition bear witness to real transformation.

Blankness/(Dis)integration: The First Novel Cycle

‘That’s the way you’re built,’ my father said.
But I can change! My cocoon’s shedding.
I want to walk in the snow and not leave a footprint.

Richey James Edwards, ‘4st 7lb’

Quant au riche avenir, NDiaye’s first published novel, appeared in 1985, when she was aged just seventeen. One assumes that she could have been no more than fifteen or sixteen when she began to write it. ‘Ce n’était pas le premier texte écrit, très loin de là’, she states. ‘C’était la énième. Mais c’était le premier que j’imaginai montrable en tout cas’ (Asibong and Jordan, 2009: 190). When one actually reads the novel and remembers the age of the person who wrote it, the experience is quite unsettling. There is something uncanny about the maturity of the psychological analysis it contains, reading as it does like the work of an old person who has been worn out by the world, and who is now focused wholly on the construction of the perfect sentence that will encapsulate her disillusionment. Add to this precocious lucidity the fact that NDiaye would go on five years later to publish a fourth novel as contemptuous, baroque and genuinely revolutionary (in terms of its implications about the functioning of racialization in contemporary Europe) as *En famille* (1990), and it begins to feel appropriate to think about NDiaye in the same kinds of prodigious terms as Rimbaud, Radiguet or Anne Frank. It would appear that she herself had, from the outset, conceived of herself as someone destined to be exceptional:

J’avais dix-sept ans, le bac approchait, après le bac je devais choisir que faire et je me disais: ‘Il faut que je sois déjà écrivain pour ne pas être

obligée de faire quoi que ce soit d'autre [...] Il faut que je fasse en sorte de n'avoir aucune espèce de diplôme afin de m'obliger à être rien d'autre qu'un écrivain. (Asibong and Jordan, 2009: 190)

The first three novels – *Quant au riche avenir* (1985), *Comédie classique* (1987) and *La Femme changée en bûche* (1989) – can, in many ways, be viewed as spectacularly agile performances by a brilliant and extremely young woman determined to prove, via the medium of literature, that she can, as the key protagonist Fanny will put it, ‘tout faire’ (*EF*, 72). Lydie Moudileno (2009) argues that throughout her writing NDiaye can be seen to be demonstrating, via plot, her heroes’ anxiety, and even the tacky slogans on the clothes of some of her minor characters, a constant awareness of what it means to be found ‘fautif’, to be lacking in the necessary knowledge of cultural codes that permit entry into the desired strata of society. Her novels, suggests Moudileno, especially these early exercises in stylistic and grammatical ‘excellence’, function as the proof that she, NDiaye, *does* possess the appropriate array of dazzling gifts and tools and accordingly will be granted access to the literary ‘castle’. It is certainly true that NDiaye made an impression on the judges. Even if it was not until the 2000s that she could be said to have attained the heights of literary stardom in France – with *Rosie Carpe* (2001), *Papa doit manger* (2003) and *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) and the Prix Femina, Comédie-Française endorsement and Prix Goncourt that these texts brought her respectively – ever since the publication of the early novels NDiaye was hailed by critics as a truly singular new talent. The fourth, *En famille*, quickly began to be discussed as a modern classic, and initiated a lengthy discussion of NDiaye in the context of serious academic criticism.¹ The works were hailed as simultaneously brilliant *and* meaningful, a joyous marriage of impeccable style and truly important, ‘universal’ themes and concerns. The influence of Proust and Henry James was noted with regard to the first two novels, and that of Kafka on the following three, and NDiaye, at the same time as being conceded significant originality, was credited with the supremely good taste of borrowing from exactly the right set of precursors.

It is indisputable that the five novels published between 1985 and 1994 were examples of a young writer who had grasped exactly how to perform her talent in such a way that she would dazzle even the harshest critic. *Quant au riche avenir* pulls off its teenage homage to Proust with wonderful warmth and wit. Many of the hinge moments in the book occur around Proustian motifs of transformational insight:

Marcel's time-travelling *madeleine* gives way to young Z's psychically gluey *clafoutis*, while the miraculous hawthorns of Combray are transmogrified into young Z's cataclysmic poplar trees. The same can be said for the presence of Kafka in *En famille*. Quite apart from the castle- and court-like dimensions of Fanny's dreadful village family, the attentive reader is treated to such glorious grace notes as when Fanny contemplates, à la Georg Bendemann of 'The Judgment', throwing herself into the lake in order to show her aunt Colette just how seriously she takes the latter's accusations of disloyalty. She is dissuaded from her suicidal impulse by an ice-cream proffered by the (still furious) aunt. NDiaye not only knows and loves her modernist masters and their motifs, then, but is able to push them adroitly onto new postmodern ground, as emotionally devastating as it is often hilarious. There is a sense in which the young NDiaye shows herself to be the ultimate 'gifted child', crafting weighty, entertaining, difficult narratives which at the same time clearly mark out their status as new cultural objects belonging in a hallowed European line. And, like the gifted children described by Alice Miller in her heretical post-psychoanalytic study (1987), NDiaye and her protagonists can be read as preoccupied, at a deep psychic level, with the challenge of pleasing their caregivers – family, patrons, the structures of the nation itself – with their gift of perfect observation. These texts may be accomplished on the one hand and pleasurable on the other, but they also reflect ceaselessly, via their protagonists' anxious concerns and increasing feelings of emptiness, on their need to be both impressive and pleasing. All five novels function as analyses of the syndrome that has produced their impressive selves, locating its roots in processes of personality splitting and emotional disinvestment. As Leslie Hill puts it in his exploration of *Quant au riche avenir*, this text uses language as a vain attempt to mask 'impending emotional disaster. This is language not as revelation but concealment, words used as a kind of rampart, designed seemingly to ward off distress, but only in the full, anxious knowledge that whatever words are meant to protect against has insidiously and unavoidably already taken root within them' (2000: 182). All five of these early novels take the reader on a journey towards textual disintegration under the force of the weight of 'genius' that has produced them, a genius that is completely unable to relax in the unselfconscious acceptance of its own basic legitimacy.

Donald Winnicott makes a crucial point when he notes that 'relaxation for an infant means not feeling a need to integrate, the

mother's ego-supportive function being taken for granted' (1962: 61). NDiaye's first five novels chart the disintegration of essentially orphaned subjects who are desperate to find acceptance. Uncertain of the solidity of either parental or societal support, these early protagonists are unable to relax, so preoccupied are they with the rigours of integration as a reward for the display of outward perfection. These are all tales of a radical falling apart as the result of an over-zealous attempt at fitting in. But the manner in which this falling apart plays out over the five novels shifts dramatically. The novels stage, in increasingly bizarre manners, their own disintegration as texts. If *Quant au riche avenir* and *Comédie classique* seem predicated on various demonstrations of structural and stylistic seamlessness (perfectly constructed sentences and hyper-lucid consciousness in the first; classical focus on unity of time, place and action in the second; middle-class male protagonists in both), by the time of the third and fourth novels the narrative begins to split into various, often incoherent perspectives, and the original protagonists (both marginalized women) are shoved violently out of the story of which they are the self-appointed heroines. The settings of all five novels eschew realism: these are not attempts to represent in 'reasonable' terms the settings of late 1980s and early 1990s France. But while the environments of the first two novels are merely quaint (the protagonists appear to move in circles reminiscent of a 1950s French film), the narratives after *La Femme changée en bûche* unfold in flagrantly dream-like landscapes, fantastical and postmodern.

This shift towards a more oneiric setting for the texts is echoed in the form taken by the later protagonists' disintegration. They are more extreme, more physical, more deranged. Young Z and the narrator of *Comédie classique* may feel as if they are falling apart inside, but the protagonists of the third, fourth and fifth novels *actually* metamorphose: into logs, pebbles, spectres and gaseous or liquefied versions of themselves. The instability at the heart of already anxious texts shifts, we might say, from neurotic to psychotic. The protagonists of *La Femme changée en bûche*, *En famille* and *Un temps de saison* may 'lose' their bodies, transformed as they are into non-human or post-human forms, but, paradoxically, they are in the first place given slightly more clearly defined bodies than young Z or the narrator of *Comédie classique*. These first two narrators are totally de-corporealized, never described in physical terms. Neither is there any indication that their (male) bodies have any signification in the world in which

they live. The protagonists of the third, fourth and fifth novels are subtly marked, however. The reader is given to understand that their bodies are found somehow wanting within the societies in which they move: these texts begin to offer a subtly politicized context for the problem of disintegration. Never actually naming ‘race’ as a factor in the heroes’ falling apart, NDiaye’s novels between 1990 and 1994 start to practise what we might, following Thelma Golden (2001), describe as ‘post-black’ art.² Her texts evoke a state of abusive racialization but, rather than blankly repeating the linguistic and ideological codes of that racialization, attempt – ironically, via the practice of a kind of blankness – to undo them.³

The Melodious Child Dead in Me: *Quant au riche avenir* (1985)

Quant au riche avenir, the first of NDiaye’s published novels, functions as a commentary on all her future writing. It dissects, in almost essayistic fashion, the psyches of later fictional protagonists, whose lack of articulacy with regard to their own behaviour renders them fantastically opaque. The text can also be read as a tantalizing explication of some of the more confusing aspects of NDiaye’s own public persona. Seeming to look forward to a time when the author would be not only celebrated but when would-be analysts such as myself would dream of interpreting *her* with reference to her published fictions, the text playfully reflects on the complex implications of such a hazardous biographical-critical enterprise:

[C]ependant, lorsque, plus tard, il aurait l’occasion de fréquenter certain écrivain, assez célèbre, et même de pénétrer suffisamment dans son intimité pour être frappé des concordances exactes qui existaient entre la vie du personnage et l’œuvre, où l’auteur ne s’exprimait d’ailleurs jamais autrement que par la voie de la première personne, le jeune Z devait remarquer à plusieurs reprises qu’il n’était jamais fait mention, dans l’existence quotidienne de l’écrivain, par ses proches de tel ou tel sentiment, anecdote, décrits par ce dernier, ou alors qu’on les citait de façon impersonnelle et sans penser particulièrement à l’auteur, dont il n’était pourtant ignoré de personne qu’il avait livré son âme entière à ses lecteurs : il semblait qu’il se fût dédoublé, ou subtilement, harmonieusement scindé en deux parties symétriques, de sorte que l’être projeté, si on le reconnaissait pour le sosie parfait de l’écrivain, conservait pourtant une propre personnalité, un tempérament, des traits particuliers, tels qu’il eût paru aussi offensant de s’en référer à lui pour

expliquer quelque action mystérieuse de l'artiste que d'imputer à une personne les agissements commis par une autre lui ressemblant. (QRA, 31-2)

More than a conventional novel, then, *Quant au riche avenir* is a microscopically nuanced psychological essay about what it means to carry paradoxical feelings that seem so violently in contradiction with one another that they threaten to tear the very self apart. The self in question is that of a teenage boy – ‘le jeune Z’ – who appears to be on his way to an adult state of depression. The tripartite narrative is a step-by-step post-mortem of young Z’s trajectory towards a kind of ‘soul death’. This is in stark contrast to the later works which tend to ‘perform’ an already existing psychic blankness in extreme form, with neither explanation, nor lamentation, nor meta-commentary.⁴ *Quant au riche avenir* is clearly a text that NDiaye had to write in order to set down with as much analytical clarity as possible her single greatest preoccupation: the problem of emotion’s gradual expiry. Here, the problem is examined carefully, using all the words that are needed, before later texts, their narrators themselves mostly affectless and zombified, can go on to experiment with that same preoccupation in a more truly ‘post-emotional’ manner.

Young Z, still at school and living at home (like the young NDiaye at the time of the text’s composition) tries to be a ‘true self’ and to make genuine connections with others – his girlfriend, his aunt, his schoolmates – but, for various reasons, finds that he cannot. And so begins his drift into melancholia, schizoid splitting, and an almost intolerably moving flirtation with the possibility of withdrawal from psychic – and perhaps physical – life. The author kills off young Z’s parents in the opening sentence, telling the reader that, owing to early orphanhood, our hero was brought up by ‘une vague tante’ (QRA, 7). This is the first move in NDiaye’s seemingly endless experimentation with different forms of literary parricide, as the series of novels, stories and plays that follow present, almost without exception, protagonists whose mothers and fathers are either physically absent or, as is more usually the case, so emotionally distant and unresponsive as to be as good as dead. The figure of young Z’s aunt, known simply as ‘Tante’, will come, as in so many of NDiaye’s subsequent narratives, to represent the possibility of a new and better caregiver (both respectable and emotionally fulfilling), only for her ‘family romance’ alternative to be found, in its turn, to pose new, perhaps even greater problems for the protagonist.⁵

On the novel's opening page we are given a remarkable, almost comically excessive, amount of psychological information about our young hero: the emotional distance between young Z and Tante has played a part in the development of his troubled personality: anxious, narcissistic, self-flagellating and, to a certain extent, paranoid, young Z is obsessed with finding meaning in existence through the hyper-reflective activity of writing and the analysis of others, while at the same time terrified of truly scrutinizing himself and so admitting the more painful, embarrassing or contradictory aspects of his behaviour. The narrator later insists in particular upon young Z's pronounced tendency towards mental and intellectual over-activity, a tendency that coexists with feelings of grandiosity ('la vanité du jeune Z était immense', *QRA*, 104), 'une humilité parfois excessive' (*QRA*, 104), feelings of invisibility ('on ne lui prêtait guère plus attention que s'il n'avait pas existé', *QRA*, 104) and debilitating loneliness: 'Il était seul', we are told, 'et rien ne lui semblait moins romanesque' (*QRA*, 106). Young Z's silent, paranoid hostility towards seemingly innocuous figures in his life – such as the boy in his class who is useless at Latin prose translation – is related with a comical deadpan articulacy, at the bottom of which the chortling reader nevertheless cannot help but feel pity for the protagonist's apparent inability to relate to anybody in a straightforward manner: 'Il se mit à craindre ses contemporains comme les fomenteurs de quelque mystérieux complot tramé à ses dépens, dont, peut-être, il fallait voir dans la personne du garçon stupide et si mauvais en thème, qui avait de bonnes raisons de le jalouser, l'instigateur principal' (*QRA*, 106). Banal (if irritating) characters and incidents assume the heights of tragic persecution, while any possibility of a 'good enough' relationship seems to get snuffed out by young Z's inability to trust the other person.⁶

Two relationships seem to hold out the promise of something emotionally real and satisfying for young Z, but both founder on the rocks of paranoia and self-hatred. Just over halfway through the novel we are told about a desire that unexpectedly grips young Z as he is returning home from school one day: he longs for Tante to have made him a moist and gooey cherry *clafoutis* for his tea. Since Tante habitually prepares dry biscuits, the fantasy is far from likely to be fulfilled. And yet, lo and behold, what does young Z find waiting for him when he gets home but a moist and gooey cherry *clafoutis*, prepared by Tante's loving hand: the boy nearly faints from surprise and pleasure. The episode is more than a knowing teenage nod to the potential psychic intensity of a neo-Proustian teatime. In Tante's

quasi-fantastical fulfilment of her nephew's deepest wish for a certain form of nourishment, NDiaye sketches the contours of a care-giving relationship that has the potential for satisfaction, a relationship wherein the caregiver can, at least on occasion, sense the unstated fantasies and desires of her charge, and offer to fulfil them with a quasi-magical sensitivity.⁷ In this wonderful moment of 'unreasonable' needs unexpectedly met, we witness young Z perceiving the possibility of emotional communication within relationships, a glimpse of the good news that love and dependency need not end in frustration and despair. The incident, we are told, 'lui sembla révélateur de liens profonds qui existaient entre lui et Tante' (*QRA*, 66), and young Z is able, for a time, to feel pleasure and pride in the confirmation that Tante truly loves him.⁸ But the period of reassurance is short-lived. Young Z soon gives way to a renewed doubt about the reality of his intimacy with Tante. He is haunted by anxieties about her fantastical metamorphosis, as she dreams, into someone unrecognizable, 'un terrain glissant' (*QRA*, 70), and these anxieties quickly lead him back towards a position of defensiveness and emotional disinvestment: 'Il était alors distant non par appréhension mais par fierté, pour ne pas avoir l'air, face à Tante qui se cantonnait dans une sévérité sans cause, d'en être touché en lui faisant des avances' (*QRA*, 70). His feelings for his aunt eventually change back into a condescending pity. There is no real connection between them, he surmises, and she is a depressed and depressing woman: 'Que Tante persévérât à vivre était pour le jeune Z un mystère que ne parvenaient à élucider ses plus grands efforts d'imagination' (*QRA*, 83). And, later still: 'il se surprenait de plus en plus souvent à l'appeler "Pauvre Tante"' (*QRA*, 93). As for the unexpected schoolboy friendship with Blériot, it too seems, for one miraculous moment, to be too good to be true, before rapidly disintegrating into something that is cut-off, paranoid and dead. Like some kind of adolescent angel, the mysterious classmate Blériot – 'tout enluminé de délicatesse et de bonté' (*QRA*, 107) – surges out of nowhere to offer young Z companionship and conversation, apparently expecting nothing in return. Very quickly, however, young Z begins to feel a kind of repulsion towards his new friend, whom he experiences as being uncomfortably similar to himself (*QRA*, 109–10). Blériot's openness about himself and about failings which young Z recognizes as common to them causes young Z to shut down completely, freezing his new friend out of the intimacy which has so suddenly sprung up between them:

Il le rabrouait, furieux, tâchait, afin de l'obliger à se taire, de lui montrer l'aspect méprisable de ce qu'il avançait avec tant de fierté; ou bien il se cantonnait dans un froid silence qui soulignait si désagréablement sa totale incompréhension de ces choses que Blériot finissait, malheureux, par ne plus oser ouvrir la bouche. (QRA, 110)

Young Z prefers disingenuous cruelty to a closeness he finds embarrassing; in order to avoid feelings of intimacy, he splits into different variously rejecting, hypocritical and blankly disavowing selves, all motivated into emergence by the unshakable, ignominious conviction that the contemptibly honest Blériot is his 'double moins réussi' (QRA, 111).⁹

Instead of cultivating the seeds of closeness to be found in a relationship such as this, young Z seems doomed – like every one of NDiaye's subsequent protagonists – to flounder in pursuit of unattainable phantoms. The first third of the novel is devoted to the dissection of his obsession with a girlfriend known simply as 'l'amie', a sort of teenage version of Proust's Odette, whose tantalizing blankness sets her up as the first in a series of spectral NDiayean love-objects. (These will find their most iconic form in the mythical Tante Léda of 1990's *En famille* and the ghostly women in green of 2005's *Autoportrait en vert*.) Young Z's love for his girlfriend is predicated entirely on his painful clinging to her absence, an absence mitigated only by occasional, unsatisfying 'dates' in the centre of Paris (the girl lives in the provinces), or else by the infrequent arrival of boring, emotionally disengaged letters. 'Sans le réaliser nettement', we are told, 'il avait fait de cette double absence, physique et épistolaire, la raison principale de son amour' (QRA, 18). Strangely indifferent to his affection, 'l'amie' is also impossible to interpret, always leaving young Z with the sensation of a vague and foggy presence that is utterly resistant to penetration. The insipid texts she sends him from time to time are all he has to sustain his frenzied desire. He waits for them to arrive in the manner of a furious baby, dreading the 'désarroi qu'il ressentirait si rien n'arrivait ce jour-là' (QRA, 13). But not only do they fail to arrive within the period of what Winnicott might call tolerable frustration – when they do arrive they contain no nourishing emotional content whatsoever:

La jeune fille cependant ne l'entretenait que d'affaires trop vagues et de portée trop étroite, insuffisamment en relation avec eux-mêmes, pour que le jeune Z pût alimenter ses convictions, effacer ses doutes ou croire seulement que les lettres de son amie complétaient de quelque manière que ce fût la connaissance qu'il avait d'elle. (QRA, 39)

The drops of 'letter-milk', when they come, then, are entirely without taste, and young Z's infantile anguish is more acute than ever. Like the later 'real' NDiaye baby Titi, son of the depressive Rosie Carpe, young Z can do no more than suck at a mysteriously unresponsive nipple. The comparison between young Z's emotionally unreachable girlfriend and his actually dead parents is one that the boy himself draws. In a remarkably analytical passage near the denouement of this opening section devoted to 'l'amie', the narrator declares:

Et elle était morte pour lui au même titre que ses parents dont, s'il les voyait vivre, c'était dans l'espèce d'immatérialité fantomale, lointaine et blanche, où il feignait de croire qu'il ne croyait véritablement, par désir de ne pas paraître à ses propres yeux hideusement réaliste, que vivaient les morts. (*QRA*, 59)

Unable to internalize the reality of what he has come to experience, affectively speaking, as an intolerably spectral presence, young Z gradually switches off. He trains himself not to feel the full force of his pain; he splits himself into various fragments: a non-empathic, disinvested self looking down condescendingly on the suffering one. He spends hours composing 'un visage approprié, détendu et calmement expectatif' (*QRA*, 25). In short, he undergoes a process of what André Green (1983) describes as 'blank mourning'. The sixteen-year-old NDiaye, incredibly, offers her reader a detailed, fictionalized account of the psychic processes first described just five years previously by Green in his description of the various stages of shutting down in children of so-called 'dead' mothers. And, like Green, NDiaye appears to be noting that such children will usually be drawn, in later years, to love-objects exuding precisely the same qualities of spectrality that they experienced as infants. Young Z drifts back and forth, then, between different kinds of deadness: from the literal non-life of his biological parents to the perceived emotional deathliness of Tante; from the ghostly absence of 'l'amie' to a suddenly deceased blonde female schoolmate, worshipped by the surviving teenagers as a glamorous, mythical goddess (*QRA*, 100) – a sort of collective 'dead mother' – but ultimately buried in a figuratively blank grave, the loss never truly felt by anybody at an emotional level, to the point that 'le jeune Z s'étonnait que le mystère de la mort suscitât si peu de questions et d'angoisse' (*QRA*, 101).¹⁰

Ultimately, young Z's need to master and conceal his own emotions turns him into a robotic character, unable to respond either to personal sadness or 'les misères du monde', which increasingly appear to him

'sous les nuances douces d'une vague irréalité' (QRA, 72). While his ever-growing sensations of affective blankness heighten a sense of existence as grey and meaningless, they also seem to sharpen (in accordance with Green's clinical diagnosis) his capacities for psychological and linguistic analysis. Young Z finds that he is a brilliant, almost magical seer of other people's hypocrisy, body language and generally disavowed behaviour (QRA, 68). Increasingly marginalized for his witch-like talents – 'on le jugeait bizarre' (QRA, 94) – young Z is condemned to hover on the wrong side of the simple pleasures of life, as if at the edge of a swimming-pool into which he simply dare not plunge (QRA, 95). By the time of the novel's closing section, existence appears to have become unmanageable. As if at the heart of one of Baudelaire's 'Spleen' poems, young Z is more and more compelled to withdraw from life itself, prey as he is to an experience of it as nothing more than a 'vaste ensemble de choses grisâtres et mouvantes' (QRA, 112). The final pages, in which he runs spontaneously out of school towards an unspeakable future – 'une vie mystérieuse mais accessible' (QRA, 113) – take him towards a fantasy that sounds alarmingly like suicide. It is the image of Tante, however – Tante and her 'bon visage calme, froid et rose' (QRA, 115), Tante who has been, after all, it would suddenly appear, sufficiently internalized by her nephew for something like a feeling of 'realness' to emerge – that stops the young boy in his Romantic, would-be self-annihilating tracks. Like a French Aunt Em calling her Dorothy back from Oz, or old Lillian Gish offering grandmotherly counsel while framed by a black sky of stars in Charles Laughton's 1955 film *Night of the Hunter*, this surprising vision of a caring Tante stays with the reader long after the memory of NDiaye's brilliantly constructed sentences and vertiginously analytical passages have faded. This image of a miraculous aunt contains the sustaining fantasy of a truly good-enough love. It is a fantasy that will appear on many – though far from all – of NDiaye's blank family horizons.

My Victory is Verbal: *Comédie classique* (1987)

Quizzed by Bernard Pivot on the literary French television show *Apostrophes* regarding the conceit – in every sense, perhaps – of her new, one-sentence novel *Comédie classique*, the nineteen-year-old NDiaye refused to acknowledge that there was anything extraordinary whatsoever about this much-discussed central 'feature' of the work.

‘C’était un jeu,’ she stated, staring wide-eyed and somewhat blankly at her middle-aged interlocutor. Claiming that she found it easier to write, in fact, than a more conventional novel, she declared: ‘Je n’ai pas cherché à prouver quoi que ce soit [...] Ce n’est pas la chose la plus importante, cette phrase unique’. People should look for other things in the novel, she went on to say: the humanity, for example, the humour. Regarding the perceived practical difficulties of going to bed when one is in the middle of constructing an endless sentence, NDiaye could not be clearer: ‘C’est pas un problème.’ ‘C’est pas un problème?’, repeated Pivot, incredulous. ‘Non.’¹¹

The ‘problem’ of the novel’s remarkable existence as a single sentence is fascinating within the wider context of the way in which NDiaye’s protagonists frequently respond to a perceived stigmatizing singularity which they feel is over-emphasized by others and which they must therefore disavow, even as they themselves continually draw attention to that stigmatizing singularity. For this long sentence of 1987 *does* end up operating as a vaguely stigmatizing weight – Les Éditions de Minuit, lest we forget, turned the book down – which NDiaye bears, indeed underlines, with spectacular courage and confidence, but then claims is utterly irrelevant. A double movement of exaggeration and denial is thus set in place: committing herself to a really rather daring and confrontational representational act, NDiaye simultaneously blanks out that gesture, practically insisting that it has never even taken place.¹² Similarly, the plot itself revolves around an act that is overwhelming in its affective intensity – the first-person narrator’s planned killing of his mother at his sister Judith’s behest – and is at the same time experienced as a total non-event, never registered as serious by the narrator himself, and ultimately consigned to a blank zone of unrealized fantasy. Anticipating the affectless familial revenge-violence of the novel *La Sorcière* (1996) and the play *Papa doit manger* (2003), *Comédie classique* maintains a truly bizarre tension between deadpan banality and disavowed exceptionality.

The narrator’s pathology finds its most dazzling representation precisely in his insistence upon relating the events of the day via a 100-page sentence. For the sentence is highly manipulative: it will not allow the reader to escape – at least, not without some degree of anxiety or guilt – from its endless babble. It resembles the hyperactive monologue of a person with no interest whatsoever in the capacities of his or her interlocutor to absorb what it is that s/he is saying. ‘Don’t abandon me!’ the narrator appears to be saying, without, of course, admitting as much.

‘Let me talk at you until you drop from exhaustion!’ The hapless reader must do all the work of interpretation or ‘communication’, since the narrator appears not to care whether or not his message is clear, only that it never ends. Like a number of characters in later NDiaye texts – one thinks of Nathalie, the spectral young mother Nadia meets on the train to Toulon in *Mon cœur a l’étroit* (2007), or the garrulous truck driver who fills Fanny with non-stop empty chatter as well as his semen in *En famille* (1990) – the narrator suffers from a severe case of unchecked logorrhea. He appears, moreover, to be incapable of reacting to events that seem to demand a strong reaction: having received the letter from Judith in which she asks him to murder their mother, the narrator merely stuffs it in his pocket, ‘en me promettant vaguement de me pencher tout à l’heure sur la question’ (CC, 17). Constantly splitting himself, like young Z, into different parts, each judging, patronizing or ignoring the other, he also manifests marked tendencies towards suicidal depression (CC, 20, 110), paranoia (CC, 104) and vain transgression (CC, 68). Once again, the key challenge for this character is to allow himself fully to feel pain. When he is betrayed by his girlfriend Sophie and friend Fausto, he announces to the reader that he is ‘nullement jaloux, seulement écœuré et las, et attristé de cette pathétique absence de jalousie qui me paraissait témoigner de l’échec définitif et sans grandeur de notre aventure’ (CC, 121).

Not long into the novel, the narrator presents us with a grotesque and unexpected image: a tooth – or perhaps ‘un éclat d’os’ (CC, 30) – lurking in a minor character’s beef casserole. Something similarly hard and potentially damaging is floating beneath the surface of his stylish family melodrama. *Comédie classique* provides us with the beginnings of a glimpse into the deeply unhealthy relational framework from which this narrator’s blankness emerges. Split, in both economic and emotional terms, and struggling to integrate both the father’s recent death and the presence of the mother’s brutish new lover Hubert – an unwelcome stepfather, who will be echoed by the figures of old white liberal Zelner in *Papa doit manger* and young white fascist Rocco in *Autoportrait en vert* – the family is bent on concealing the horrible feelings that are clearly gnawing away at it from the inside. Constantly discussing the sensationalized murder of an old man in the neighbourhood, they deploy this violent news story as a screen on which to project their own disavowed feelings of rage. When violence does break out among them – at one point Hubert slaps Judith in the face – the mother’s reactions are to serve a chocolate mousse (CC, 59), to weep briefly (CC, 60), and to cheer up (CC, 61), while the mysterious Judith broods in her

bedroom. Like so many later NDiayean mothers, this one is hopelessly vague and out of reach. The narrator claims to love her ‘en dépit de tout’, but feels deeply anxious at having failed to bring her a gift when coming to visit for lunch (CC, 40), an occasion on which she barely registers his presence, ‘ne déposant qu’un baiser rapide et mécanique sur ma joue’ (CC, 62). At one point he indulges in a particularly grisly fantasy about ‘jolie Maman’ (CC, 41) being decapitated, her head rolling and tumbling, like a jack or a marble, down the staircase towards her detested fiancé Hubert (CC, 42).

The moments of the story during which the mother appears most in her element are when she is relating the melancholic romances of her bucolic adolescence prior to meeting the children’s father:

[...] Maman qu’avait semblé bouleverser ma brève allusion à l’amour tout d’un coup se jeta sur le canapé avec un long soupir de lassitude ou de regret, saisit entre ses deux mains tremblantes ses joues qu’elle avait rebondies et colorées, fraîches comme celle d’une mignonne enfant et déplora dans un accent de tristesse qui me remua d’avoir laissé à jamais derrière elle, sans pleinement s’en repaître alors, l’heureuse époque où elle s’en allait en compagnie de ses sœurs laver le linge de la maisonnée à la rivière avoisinante [...] (CC, 49)

The memory of what happened to their mother next – the meeting with the handsome, quasi-divine stranger who emerges from the water, ‘seulement couvert d’une serviette nouée sur sa hanche’ (CC, 50) – is clearly engraved on her children’s memories, her tales of youthful desire excited and frustrated long before they were ever thought of having presumably been repeated on many an occasion of their childhood, when they were as much prisoners to their mother’s monologues as we readers now are to the vengeful narrator’s. NDiaye’s portrait of a simultaneously affectless and narcissistic mother, partially grieving for a love-object lost before her children were born, once again duplicates aspects of André Green’s theory of the ‘mère morte’, as does her depiction of the ‘deadened’ dimensions of that mother’s children.

The sister Judith is painted with particular insistence as a disquietingly zombified figure, lurking ‘immobile, sans expression’ (CC, 62) at her bedroom window like a statue, or else sitting in her bedroom, doll-like and surrounded by dolls, ‘une sorte de répulsion contenue, froide, visible dans les précautions offensantes avec lesquelles elle examinait chaque morceau de viande avant de le porter à sa bouche’ (CC, 52). Like so many of NDiaye’s protagonists, Judith seems anorexic

(the narrator writes of her ‘sein maigre’, her ‘corps aride et sans chair’, CC, 59),¹³ is certainly depressed, and – as two such conditions might suggest – is divided into opposing ‘feeling’ and ‘unfeeling’ fragments. If some parts of her appear affectless, other parts seem to be seething with intense rage. The narrator, fearful of catching what he considers to be his sister’s madness, describes Judith as ‘irréelle, folle’ (CC, 16), as she giggles hysterically in a ‘ricanement sans fond’ (CC, 22). Her obsessive love for their dead father renders her ‘étrange et imprévisible’ (CC, 36), while her equally obsessive interest in her mother’s sexuality (‘Judith, se représentant cela, frissonnait de honte pour elle’, CC, 80) causes her (like Fanny in *En famille*) to oscillate between a drive towards anonymous promiscuity and virginal, asexual seclusion. Her ultimate stance of ambivalence is, of course, her plan of matricide, which she conceives, Electra-like, as an act that can only be executed by her brother. When she comes to the latter’s flat towards the end of the novel, to discuss the final details of the matricide, the narrator’s description of his sister’s face captures in unforgettable terms the oddly seductive blank splitting that is taking place within her:

[...] souriant d’un étrange sourire plaqué (mais peut-être me le faisais-je trouver artificiel simplement le rouge vif dont elle avait coloré ses lèvres pour la première fois de sa vie et qui rendait vorace, drôlement, le bas de son visage, en contraste avec la tragique froideur de son regard maintenant posé sur moi avec calme et l’assurance, des fous, des hallucinés altiers, superbes, que je pensais ce qu’elle pensait et désirais ce qu’elle voulait), qu’elle [...] (CC, 112)

In the narrator’s evocation of Judith’s disturbing mechanical quality, a robotic dissociation reminiscent of the somnambulists of Dr Caligari, NDiaye once again seems to echo the preoccupations of certain psychotherapeutic analysts, and is here particularly in tune with what Duncan Cartwright (2010) describes as ‘the alive-dead self in borderline states’. This ‘alive-dead self’ may be exemplified by Judith, but it can really be found everywhere in this novel: from the non-reactive narrator to the ‘dead’ mother, from the empty-headed girlfriend Sophie to the hapless cousin Georges, who begins inexplicably to die from the inside after the apparently traumatic non-event of losing his suitcase at Saint-Lazare station, becoming ‘laconique et l’œil vide’ (CC, 103), ‘pareil [...] à un cadavre, digne et pâle, dans son suaire’ (CC, 111), and eventually burning to (full-blown) death in an improbable house fire on the novel’s final page.

This final page is as oddly ungenerous in terms of satisfying the reader's frustrated desires as the entire one-sentence novel has been. The reader has been drawn closer and closer towards the anticipated murder of the mother, but no climax, resolution or catharsis of any kind is actually allowed to take place, and instead it is the unimportant character of Georges who is killed, in an absurd, grotesque aside. The mother carries on living, in all her ungrievable, spectral emptiness, while her two adult children (the prototypically inappropriate and 'disappointing' brother-sister duo that will be revisited by NDiaye, years later, in the fuller form of Rosie and Lazare Carpe), find that their brief moment of mad, quasi-incestuous, matricidal intimacy simply fizzles out, undiscussed and largely unacknowledged: '[...]’évitali désormais de voir Judith qui après quelques lettres auxquelles je m’abstins de répondre et deux ou trois visites chez moi où je la reçus d’une façon ferme et froide, parut se résigner à l’abandon de son absurde dessein[...]' (CC, 124) This particular Orpheus and Electra lack the energy to convert their blank depression into violence, but subsequent texts by NDiaye will initiate a descent into physical brutality that seems positively unending.

Not in Kansas Any More: *La Femme changée en bûche* (1989)

The narrator of NDiaye's third published novel, *La Femme changée en bûche*, can certainly not be accused of failing to convert her blank depression into violence. The violence she achieves is far from cathartic, however, and resolves absolutely nothing. Reminiscent of another classical character, Medea – she murders her child, ostensibly in order to punish her unfaithful husband – this narrator is possibly the most psychotically affectless of all NDiaye's protagonists to date. She relates her tale of infanticide, flight and fantastical metamorphosis in a tone of such icy self-justification, and is so madly fixated on fetishistic details such as her tapping red shoes, that the book is sometimes painful to read. Both the dissociated central character and the increasingly multi-voiced narrative (from which the protagonist is eventually squeezed by more powerful subjectivities) can be viewed as an ambitious attempt on the part of NDiaye to stage the terrifying processes of schizoid personality disintegration. The first of her stories in which the young female protagonist's perspective will be violently axed halfway through her melodramatic tale, and replaced by the viewpoint of female friends

and relatives and/or that of a mysterious male figure (this is a pattern that will be repeated in *En famille*, *La Naufragée* and *Rosie Carpe*), the novel appears in this way to ape the narrative trajectory of Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960), perhaps the ultimate Western popular cultural reference point for schizophrenic breakdown.¹⁴

This text is a bizarre mixture of styles, tones and genres. On the one hand, it is self-consciously avant-garde writing in the style of NDiaye's Éditions de Minuit godparents Samuel Beckett and Marguerite Duras; on the other it is tacky, trashy comedy-horror – the early films of John Waters spring irresistibly to mind – about a camp and demented 'teen queen' on the rampage. As well as shades of ancient Greek theatre, flashes of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1937) are clearly discernible in the Devil's talking cat Mécistée, while more than one French critic (e.g. Bernstein, 1989) claimed, perhaps a little over-imaginatively, to find elements of 'le conte africain'. If NDiaye's first two novels had suggested that she was something special in terms of the stylistic brilliance of her texts coupled with the maturity of her psychological observation, *La Femme changée en bûche* marks a turning point from which there would be no going back: in this novel the full force of NDiaye's indigestible *strangeness* emerges unabashed. Embracing the possibilities of the fantastic as a means of more thoroughly exploring madness and the split-off personality, the text also goes further than the earlier publications both emotionally and politically, opening up the ideological matrices of gender, sexuality, capitalism and stigma as the terrain on which systematized forms of blankness and splitting must be played out.

If young Z and the narrator of *Comédie classique* suffered quietly from the death, disappearance, inaccessibility or absence of their mother and father, the xylomorphic Woman of *La femme changée en bûche* elevates the problem of traumatic parental disconnection to dizzying heights. Shortly before killing her child, the Woman visits her own living but ghostly parents, and discovers them inexplicably clearing their house of banal objects, loading the old things onto an unknown aunt. Finding them 'abattus et résignés', and noting that 'ils soupirent et déjà un oubli flottant les apaise', she makes a startling confession to the reader: 'Je me suis dit que je les haïssais sûrement sous ma tendresse filiale' (FCB, 20). This private hatred of her father and mother can be seen to play a function in the way events unfold for the Woman that is every bit as crucial as the intrigue with her husband and child. The increasing lack of solidity she experiences within her innermost being,

which sets in early in the novel and reaches its climax with her metamorphosis into a log, appears clearly linked to the absence of secure parental attachment. It is to the unpromising figures of her best friend Valérie and the Devil that the Woman will turn for replacement parents, and this misguided project of child-orchestrated adoption can be seen, as is the case for subsequent abandoned protagonists, to shape her entire nightmarish trajectory.

The Woman arrives at the Devil's abode in 'Kalane', following her killing of 'Bébé', because, she claims, she has nowhere else to go. Having burned her bridges in the real world, she has come to the end of the line, to the radical outside of Being fantasized by young Z, perhaps, when he runs out of school into the streets of Paris in the closing pages of *Quant au riche avenir*. This arrival at the edges of Hell is heavy with existential despair, tinged at once with the stench of suicide and the dream of an improbable renaissance: similar moments can be found in *En famille*, when Fanny returns to the grandmother's house after Tante Colette has warned her never to show her face again – she will be ripped to shreds by the dogs, before rising again as a brighter, whiter version of herself – and in *Rosie Carpe*, when the heroine, in her own words, 'au bout du rouleau' (RC, 195), makes the desperate decision to seek out her abandoning family in Guadeloupe. As is the case with Fanny's and Rosie's quasi-suicidal hinge-moments, the Woman's flight to Kalane is soaked in a specifically infantile fantasy: she is aiming for one last shot at being adequately parented. Throughout her stay in the Devil's quarters, the Woman appears to be looking for a new mother and father, yet every candidate for the job proves neglectful or abusive, leaving her with the impression of endlessly repeated abandonment, feeling 'aussi inutile qu'un fétu' (FCB, 79). 'Je ne voyais dans les coins que des preuves de la plus grande négligence', she complains of this fantastical new children's home, 'et cependant y avait-il véritablement quelqu'un que j'aurais pu accuser?' (FCB, 74)

The figure of the Devil himself comes across as the ultimate abandoning father, and it is extremely difficult not to read into his portrait nods to both NDiaye's own father and her recently 'adoptive' father, Jérôme Lindon, director of Les Éditions de Minuit. Like the former, the Devil lives in an exotic, faraway locale with more than a hint of West Africa (Kalane is the name of a town in Senegal). Certain key characteristics – his decaying abode, his cold arrogance, his various supine flunkies – are echoed in later texts (*En famille*, *Autoportrait en vert*, *Trois femmes puissantes*) involving the female protagonist's

visit to an estranged father specifically coded as African. As for the Devil's links to Lindon, they are numerous. Painted as a literary scout, the Devil attracts to his quarters a charismatic young man who prides himself on having written the most evil and sickeningly transgressive book imaginable, declaring: '[J]e suis certain qu'il me recevra comme un prince' (*FCB*, 29).¹⁵ The narrator finds it galling to discover that while she herself had been welcomed with open arms by the Devil just a couple of years previously, she is now treated with an alarming coolness. As the Devil's secretary Nisa puts it: '[N]ous ne pouvons plus avoir pour toi la même indulgence qu'autrefois lorsque tu étais plus jeune et inexpérimentée, et pleine de charme à cause de cela' (*FCB*, 41). The parallel between this sudden cessation of 'indulgence' and Lindon's perhaps surprising rejection of NDiaye's second novel *Comédie classique* after his rapturous pursuit of the teenager's first manuscript seems flagrant, reinforced by the narrator's references to the injunction that she should be more genuinely impressive than before, given the fact that previously 'ma jeunesse [...] masquait tout, les minuscules indignités et les gros artifices, et les terribles manifestations d'orgueil' (*FCB*, 52).

In her long, anguished wait for the Devil to return to her after his initial, cursory greeting (*FCB*, 70–5), the Woman, echoing young Z, resembles the Winnicottian baby waiting for the mother who takes too long to come. As Winnicott notes (2005: 131), if the waiting period is longer than the baby can bear, emotional disinvestment and some form of personality erosion will ensue. NDiaye's description of the Woman's changing psychic and physical states mirrors such an erosion. At first she worries about the possibility of starving to death (*FCB*, 72), but later, when food does mysteriously arrive but no caregiver is to be found with it, it is the coldness, solitude (*FCB*, 74) and the lack of emotional nourishment that is experienced as intolerable. 'Certainement, quand je me réveillerai, il sera là', (*FCB*, 75), she repeats to herself, before dreaming that she herself is the Devil-father (*FCB*, 75), a fantasy that gives way to an unshakable sense that 'vraiment je n'étais plus rien, qu'une silhouette transparente' (*FCB*, 79). Given equally short shrift by the talking cat Mécistée, to whom she has clung like another adoptive parent (*FCB*, 59), and the white-blond, ghostly secretaries Nisa, Edna and Pesta ('Comme j'aurais aimé m'asseoir sur les genoux de Pesta!', *FCB*, 78), the Woman has nowhere to go but into a zone resembling psychotic breakdown.

The second half of the novel (itself split into two separate sections) conveys a state of absolute fragmentation, at every conceivable level: generic, stylistic, grammatical, syntactical, narratological, gendered,

ontological. The Woman's gradual disappearance from the narrative itself – she is, for a time, completely replaced by a third-person narrator who wishes to relate the bizarre adventures of the Woman's friend Valérie, Valérie's other friend Esmée, Esmée's fiancé Stéphane Ventru, and Stéphane Ventru's conservative aunt and unnameable pet – seems to be the logical conclusion to her increasingly unmanageable feelings of invisibility.¹⁶ Like Winnicott's 'unmirrored' child, helplessly losing her core sense of self through insufficient attention and empathy on the part of her caregivers, the Woman cannot experience herself as real, alive, or fully human; even the faint consciousness that remains is shoved aside (without even so much as a full stop's warning) by the increasingly powerful new narrator:

Pourquoi mon cœur ne battait-il pas à me crever la poitrine? Ah, déjà le bois l'avait atteint

Très bien, très bien, songeait la bête. C'était un miracle qu'elle pût songer, étant une pure abstraction. Malheureux Ventru dans ses habits volés!

Tous quatre sont passés sans me jeter un coup d'œil. J'ai tenté d'appeler Valérie mais c'était trop tard. Ma langue ne remuait plus, figée dans le sapin. Je me suis levée, j'ai ramassé ma valise et aussi vite que me l'ont permis mes genoux raidis je me suis dirigée vers la rivière

Très bon, très bon, songeait la bête satisfaite. (FCB, 98)

Once the Woman is silenced entirely (having become a full-blown log, she has neither voice nor consciousness) the new narrator is free to concentrate entirely on Valérie and the others, which s/he does in a relatively lucid if whimsical manner. By the final section, however, when the Woman, back to human form, re-enters the narrative, the reader faces an utterly schizophrenic text, lurching from first to third person, between various different perspectives (mainly the Woman, Esmée and Stéphane Ventru, although the shifts are not always clear). A total and seemingly uncontrolled disintegration of subjectivity has taken place, and the groaning, twittering, multi-voiced text resembles a body in the throes of diabolical possession.

This final wholesale psychic splitting is, of course, in many ways the logical conclusion of a narrative which had only ever given a superficial imitation of unity and coherence. The Woman was, from the outset, split at an emotional level, long before her stint in Kalane. Governed by terrifying principles of pride, rage and perceived humiliation, these sensations sometimes appearing to pull against each other, at other times seeming to operate in concert, she veers insanely between unmanageable

affect and total affectlessness. ‘J’avais le sentiment très vif de nous avoir contraints mon mari et moi à redevenir moraux et d’avoir accompli un acte d’une très grande moralité’ (FCB, 24) she announces, before remarking on the satisfying sound of her heels clacking on the stairs. She is directed in her behaviour not by the Devil but, one might argue psychoanalytically, by a worldly (if ferocious) superego, whose despotic sense of ‘duty’ simultaneously stirs up uncontrollably vengeful ‘feelings’ in its subject and stifles all her capacity actually to *feel*. Shortly before placing Bébé in the diabolical outfit that will burn him to death, she kisses the infant ‘avec un sentiment de grande tendresse qui me remuait tout l’intérieur’ (FCB, 22), exclaiming to herself apropos the clothing material: ‘C’est une bien jolie petite toilette, car le tissu était fin et la broderie délicate’ (FCB, 23). Unable to grasp the reality of her child as a living, human entity, before murdering him she ‘blanks’ him, in every sense: ‘l’enfant [...] ne pesait guère, tout en blanc’ (FCB, 17). Once he is dead, she consigns him to barely representable oblivion: ‘l’image de Bébé s’est atténuée, ses traits sont devenus flous’ (FCB, 35). The Woman is ‘hard’ long before her fantastical transformation into a log (and later a pebble), and her narrative is fragmented long before it is ripped to shreds by the spectral voices of others. Having modelled herself on the cosmically unfeeling magazine heroine ‘Lili Stark’, a character ‘au regard hardi’ (FCB, 13), who leaps over obstacles ‘comme une petite chèvre sans cervelle’ (FCB, 13), this narrator has never been, not even at the best of times – and to quote *Psycho*’s Norman Bates – ‘quite herself’.

La Femme changée en bûche, the first of NDiaye’s ‘fantastical’ fictions, is also, in a seeming paradox, the first of her texts to begin the long and fascinating process of providing a ‘real’ socio-political framework for its protagonist’s various emotional and ontological disorders. It achieves this contextualization via shadowy allusions to a highly recognizable system founded on the twin ideologies of capitalist alienation and stigmatizing marginalization. The Woman’s increasingly uncontrollable paranoia, splitting, blankness and disintegration are not only explicable within the largely psychoanalytic terms of parental withdrawal and abandonment that I have been deploying. She exists within a sharply drawn world of economic inequality and obsessive hierarchization, of obsessively gendered standards of beauty and sexual acceptability, and traumatic modes of essentializing perception, in which certain bodies and associations are, for unspecified reasons, deemed to be irremediably tainted, incapable of integration, and accordingly deserving of extermination.

It remains unclear throughout the novel exactly what undesirable quality prevents the narrator from earning the full respect of the Devil's secretaries, of the Devil himself or, in the outside world, of her husband and Valérie. The woman tells us of a 'dégoût inconscient' (FCB, 17) felt by her faithless spouse towards her: she has been 'traînée dans la boue' (FCB, 10), changed forever, on account of some humiliating act that she has performed with the Devil, in the narrative's prehistory, in order to save her husband. The tainting of her body and her very being carries the distinct whiff of sexualized abuse, rape or enforced prostitution (all practices that will be explored in greater depth in subsequent novels and plays by NDiaye), a 'vibe' that is lent added weight by both the narrator's vague references to 'la honte' of 'la chose faite' (FCB, 52) and the invasive pawing she receives at the hands of the Devil's aroused secretary Pesta (FCB, 52–7). The sense of herself as fundamentally and irreversibly spoiled to such a degree that she is a new and worthless breed of person makes the Woman's underlying psychological problems even more pronounced, as neglect-related trauma is combined with a very peculiar and apparently unspeakable stigma. Her preoccupation with becoming somebody else, somebody who is 'véritablement une fille de vingt ans' (FCB, 132) propels her towards an obsessive identification with the glamorous and yet 'ordinary' Valérie, Valérie, whose glorious normality is longingly evoked in the novel's rapturous closing words: '[E]t Valérie est ordinaire, mais son goût de l'existence la transfigure' (FCB, 157). This identification is, of course, also doomed to failure: the Woman will never be 'ordinaire', and will be doomed to live out her days as the Devil's fourth secretary.

The Woman's unnameable stigma finds a bizarre parallel in the abjection of Stéphane Ventru, the wimpish 'replacement hero' of the novel's second half. Ventru's attachment to a queer and hated pet – an animal that simultaneously resembles a dog, a monkey and a bird – causes him to be both ostracized and derided (FCB, 93). Like a shamefully private part of himself (his aunt considers that it is 'une monstruosité issue de lui-même, dont il était responsable, une absurdité créée tout exprès pour fuir certaines obligations', FCB, 92), the pet carries an almost racialized psychic weight. Considered to be Ventru's exotically tainted, hybrid offspring, it is nevertheless a 'child' that cannot be considered a *proper* child and which, like the unspeakably embarrassing 'sub-children' of later NDiaye texts (Fanny in *En famille*, Steve in *La Sorcière*, Titi in *Rosie Carpe*, Jacky in *Les Serpents*) must

be sacrificed (*FCB*, 150–1) in order for the systems of family and community to progress unimpeded by unwelcome ‘difference’.

The novel’s systems of blank conformity and obedience – exemplified by the zombifying call centre where Valérie revels in her role of manager – produce desires and relationships in which all semblance of love, spontaneity and aliveness is crushed. The sexual relationship between Valérie’s friends and call centre minions, Esmée and Ventru, becomes characterized by addictive and dehumanizing behaviour. Ventru’s reality as an emotional being is increasingly ignored by Esmée in favour of the series of muscular men with whom she finds she must pursue a blankly compulsive sex addiction (*FCB*, 100). Both his pain (‘il pleurait et geignait mais il ne l’entendait pas’, *FCB*, 103) and his own increasingly uncategorizable sexuality (‘Patin au cou de sanglier [...] d’une certain façon ne déplut pas à Ventru’, *FCB*, 112) are disavowed, as characters and narrator(s) alike speed towards a violent and farcical ‘resolution’ in marriage. By the time of their wedding, Esmée and Ventru have been worn down by ‘l’indéfinissable hargne que nous avons l’un pour l’autre et qui pour chacun réduisait l’autre à une pâle, morne silhouette haïssable, un haïssable et incompréhensible silhouette de lui-même’ (*FCB*, 144) and have thus become as dematerialized and ‘unreal’ as the Woman, through an adherence to modes of behaviour just as alienating, NDiaye seems to suggest, as a brief stay in Hell. (Kalane is where they head for the wedding, in fact, as it is, coincidentally, Ventru’s aunt’s main place of residence.)

The seeming impossibility of inscribing living love within relationships, be they parental, spousal or collegial, dogs all the characters of *La Femme changée en bûche*. This failure causes the characters to disintegrate from within, as their perceptions of themselves and each other fade to blank nothingness. The one character who appears occasionally to have some capacity for experiencing a strong emotion that resembles real love is Stéphane Ventru, who, like young Z, finds that his feelings for his aunt are overwhelming in both their intensity and their ambivalence:

En face de Tante, l’émotion me serrait la gorge, mêlée à de la peur et de la pitié, mais le sentiment dominant demeurerait, peut-être de ce que je ne savais assez lui manifester ma tendresse pour la persuader, malgré ma désinvolture, malgré mon indifférence, qu’elle était aimée, et le plus important n’était pas de l’aimer mais qu’elle n’en doute jamais. (*FCB*, 130)

Fantasizing about touching his aunt’s future dead body (*FCB*, 130) and her present living one (*FCB*, 141), Ventru describes a remarkable inner

conflict between emotion he experiences as ‘vaguement obscène’ (FCB, 141) and the ultimately stronger desire to display a public attitude of coldness, dignity and control: ‘Je tâchai de plaquer sur mes traits une expression bourrue, qu’elle me croie fatigué, ne m’adresse pas la parole ou, mieux, s’imagine que sa présence m’ennuyait’ (FCB, 142). Ventru’s flight away from his ‘true self’ towards an icy mask of blank indifference is predicated on his sense of his complex love as unacceptable. This unshakable sense of disgust at their true feelings will lead NDiaye’s protagonists into more and more dangerous forms of falseness, into situations of such remarkable self-betrayal that the Woman’s transformation into a log after her brief stay with the Devil will begin to seem almost light-hearted.

My Mother/My Aunt/My Self: *En famille* (1990)

En famille is NDiaye’s first indisputable masterpiece. Stylistically and structurally indebted to Cervantes and Kafka, Fanny’s circular quest for the mythical Tante Léda self-consciously resembles the peregrinations of both Quixote and K. The novel is nevertheless startlingly original, blending its dizzying analysis of ‘private madness’ (cf. Green 1996) with a critique of collective derangement that is at times unbelievable in its stark ferocity. NDiaye takes young Z’s stench of isolation as far as it can go, to death and beyond, filtering it through an omnipresent (racialized) shame. If this kind of shame was kept hidden in NDiaye’s first three novels, *En famille* will turn the process of ‘race’’s erasure into its central theme and stylistic conceit. As Lydie Moudileno puts it:

Marie Ndiaye refuse le mode de l’autobiographie ou du récit ‘victimisant(e)’, qui, de son propre aveu ne justifierait qu’une demi-page. Elle s’engage plutôt dans une déconstruction minutieuse des mécanismes de l’anathème: ‘C’est peut-être, justement, qu’il n’y a rien’, répond-elle lorsqu’on lui demande, de quoi, finalement, elle se plaint. Il s’agit donc d’un personnage qui a l’intention paradoxale non de raconter, mais d’élucider ‘tout le malheur’ provenant de sa naissance ratée, tout en affirmant qu’il consiste en ‘rien’. Ou, plus justement, en rien d’autre qu’en une absence. L’absence de thème. L’anathème inracontable, oublié. (Moudileno, 1998: 446)

En famille is one of the most complex texts ever to have been written about the subject’s ‘soul murder’ through racialization. It is comparable, in terms of the profundity of its insight, to the greatest American novels

on the subject – Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1953) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are texts that spring immediately to mind – but wraps the question within a cover so self-effacing that the end result is a text as chimeric as its hybrid protagonist. The novel is, in many ways, the ultimate schizoid response to an indigestible experience of racism. On the one hand, it refracts all human experience through the variable of ‘race’; on the other hand, it keeps uncannily silent about the topic, blanking it out entirely.¹⁷ A paradoxical act of (non-) communication is set in place. The reader is, at one level, invited to interpret a series of seemingly unmistakable clues as to the racialized nature of Fanny’s putative difference. As critics such as Ambroise K. Teko-Agbo (1995), Michael Sheringham (2007) and Clarissa Behar (2013) have pointed out, the ‘difference’ is grounded in corporeal and physiognomic particularities (albeit euphemistically designated) inherited from the father, who dwells in a hot part of the world. Moreover, Fanny’s paternally derived difference is shared by characters who work in the capital’s fast-food restaurant, live in the *banlieue*, possess outlandish names, are marginalized in ways connected to poverty and the display of poor taste (e.g. sportswear), and are confused with one another by the likes of Tante Colette who, speaking of young Georges, exclaims to Fanny: ‘Si tu ne m’avais pas dit de qui il s’agit [...] j’aurais cru que c’était toi!’ (*EF*, 117). Despite the presence of these clues, however, the novel is frequently read – especially in France – as if it had nothing whatsoever to do with ‘race’, indeed, as if even to suggest such a thing were to indulge in the most appallingly ‘racist’ over-interpretation. It may be that in order to read the relevant clues one must already have some insight into the workings of racialized discrimination. Without this kind of consciousness, the reader may be doomed to scrutinize the evidence in vain, seeing in it nothing but the signs of ‘universal’ alienation. In the manner of the buffoonish Eugène (‘Vraiment, je ne vois pas, ne cessait de dire Eugène en gonflant les joues’, *EF*, 30), the embarrassed village shopkeeper (‘l’aimable commerçante [...] préférerait ne pas la voir’, *EF*, 161) or, indeed, Fanny herself (‘Fanny feignit de ne pas comprendre’, *EF*, 161; ‘Fanny, honteuse, feignit de ne plus le voir, dans la crainte qu’on pût supposer entre eux quelque relation’, *EF*, 144), this kind of happily ignorant reader stares only into a blank and mystifying nothingness.¹⁸ The act of feigned ignorance is inescapable in an experience of reading *En famille*. It is inscribed within the psychologies of the main characters, but also reproduces itself within the cultural context of the novel’s reception by readers

unable or unwilling to see or to know what nevertheless blankly stares them in the face.

The ancient Greek term for feigned ignorance is *εἰρωνεία* or *ειρωνεία*, a word that gives us the English ‘irony’. Not only is irony to be found in the pretence of not knowing, it is incarnated in the quasi-psychotic – distinctly Sadeian – insensitivity of the narrator. This narrator’s icy humour when describing one of Fanny’s numerous assaults or humiliations is sometimes so cruel that the reader winces, even as s/he giggles with disbelief, torn in two opposing directions, just as Fanny herself is. Whether she is being pelted by her aunt with rotten plums,¹⁹ raped by her uncle in the back of his car, or ripped to shreds by her cousin’s dog, Fanny is never treated with kindness by the Janus-faced narrator, but is instead exposed to a spectral mockery which arises from the manner in which the events are reported. ‘Si tu parles à ma tante’, says Fanny to her uncle after he has screwed her, ‘précise bien que pour te suivre j’ai abandonné mon service’ (EF, 110). She emerges from the episode with her aunt-fixation comically intact, her pathology rather than her uncle’s wickedness becoming the focus of the narration’s languid amusement. As for the moment of her dismemberment, the images – even the punctuation – employed to relate it are oddly jocular: ‘Fanny n’avait fait entendre qu’un léger, très léger couinement! Maintenant [le chien] fouissait le poitrail, à la recherche du cœur’ (EF, 186). The drooling Fanny is laughed at even in death, then, and this death is taken even less seriously by a narrative that resurrects the victim in rosy new form a few chapters later.

And yet the reader winces at the unfairness of what Fanny must go through. The narrator seems keen to acknowledge the emotional reality of Fanny’s suffering even as she undermines it in her grotesque use of laconic humour or grating melodrama.²⁰ When Fanny shrieks that ‘mes parents m’ont fait tant de mal que je respirerai quand ils mourront!’ (EF, 22), she sounds both ridiculous and affected – and yet her complaints are more than justified: she *has* been treated abominably by these people. NDiaze’s narrative creates a truly weird dimension of emotion and non-emotion, of kindness and cruelty, in which the unhappiness of a character for whom we have developed genuine feelings of empathy both ‘counts’ and is dismissed in the same sentence. These simultaneously pathetic and humorous enunciations double back on themselves in a continuous movement of paradox. Like Fanny, the narrator is caught between warm feeling and cold contempt.²¹ ‘Elle était mensonge des pieds à la tête, conçue ainsi!’ (EF, 29), thinks Fanny to herself *about*

herself, and it is this spirit of violent self-critique that the text duplicates. Sadistic irony is sewn into its fibre. If Fanny ends up stripped of human skin, a hovering, gaseous ghoul, she has already much earlier been lowered to the position of something less than human, an operation initiated by her family and her community, in which she is complicit, and in which the narrator ‘ironically’ participates. Ambivalence is inscribed in the split-off style of narration, both executioner and victim of the very violence it describes. In NDiaye’s creation of a cruel narrative that nevertheless identifies with its victim’s sufferings, we find a prime example of what Agamben calls ‘the masochistic strategy and its almost sarcastic profundity’ (1999: 108).

However we may choose to make sense of it, *En famille* is a strangely human and inhuman text, its ‘feelings’ more raw and on display than those of almost any other contemporary French novel, and yet at the same time hard, metallic, cruel. If all the characters in *En famille* resemble automata – their robotic function often underlined by hilariously theatrical tapping feet (*EF*, 85), trembling knees (*EF*, 141) and folded arms (*EF*, 159) – no figure so fully tips into a caricature of the non-human as Fanny’s mother. *En famille* is the first of NDiaye’s texts to explore the way in which a mother’s failure to be truly ‘alive’ in her dealings with her child can, in many ways, be found at the root of much of the zombified sensibility dominating the plot, the characterization and even the grammar of the text. Fanny’s mother, accepted back into the family fold once her racialized transgression with Fanny’s father is over, seems unable, for most of the novel, to see, hear or feel her still stigmatized daughter’s presence. It is as if she has had some crucial faculty of perception cut out of her, but only in her dealings with her problematic offspring:

Car pas la moindre émotion n’altérait le doux visage de la mère de Fanny et ses yeux pâles avaient rencontré l’œil sombre de Fanny comme celui d’une inconnue, avec l’affable détachement qu’elle avait cultivé au salon de coiffure. Dans son trouble, Fanny trébucha, manqua tomber. (*EF*, 169)

Even when she is surreptitiously feeding Fanny during the latter’s period of hiding under the family staircase, it is impossible for anyone – reader, Fanny, perhaps even mother herself – to know what is going on in her heart or her head.

Il semblait qu’elle agît négligemment, dans le vague souvenir d’un devoir plutôt que par miséricorde. Se rappelait-elle seulement ce qu’elle eût trouvé dans la niche si elle avait soulevé le rideau, rien n’était moins sûr,

à voir combien distraite et lointaine elle traversait le couloir sur ses jolies mules dorées, arrêtée de temps en temps, par hasard, devant le réduit sans que sa cheville tremblât, sans que par un petit battement du pied elle fit connaître à sa fille une pensée à son sujet, un regret. (*EF*, 182)

If Fanny has difficulty in experiencing herself as a living, sentient, human being, and if this difficulty in registering Fanny's humanity is to a large extent shared by the narrator, Fanny's mother completes the deadening collaboration. Indeed, the only occasions on which Fanny's mother does betray any emotion whatsoever are when she is roused to anger by Fanny's refusal to stay dead: 'Que n'es-tu demeurée morte! Le problème qu'il y avait à ne plus vivre, en regard de ton état présent, j'aimerais que tu me l'expliques' (*EF*, 224). Beyond all qualifications such as good or evil, Fanny's mother is the ultimate maternal blank. When disowning her daughter, she erases the very appellation of maternity, signing the letter merely 'la deuxième sœur de Tante Colette' (*EF*, 225).

The mythical aunt Léda is, of course, the adult Fanny's new love-object, and she is linked to the dream of a different kind of integration. In Léda, Fanny believes she will find a saviour, a protector, a truly good enough new mother. Léda is, in a way, even more alluring than the panoply of blank mother substitutes to whom Fanny clings in the hope that their impossible love will grant her acceptance – and whose hard, pink queen is Tante Colette. Léda is desirable in a more poignant manner, since she is the one fantasy parent who promises to resemble the isolated Fanny, her long-ago banishment constituting the very essence of her identity, as far as Fanny is concerned. In this desire to be adopted by a new relative who is just as exotically marginalized as she is, we find the seeds of a recurring NDiayean family romance, that of the imaginary dark mother. The 'dark mother' fantasy rivals the 'dead mother' complex that afflicts Fanny and so many of NDiaye's protagonists, a complex that causes them to repeat the experience of rejection from their zombified (white) mother in a whole host of unfeeling (white) love-objects. Both the 'dark mother' fantasy and the 'dead mother' complex jostle for supremacy within the same subject (we will see a similar battle taking place within both Lucie in *La Sorcière* and Nadia in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*), but the former is inevitably beaten into second place by always remaining so resolutely in the realms of unrealisable fantasy. Tante Léda (like the fleeting, yellow-robed woman of *La Sorcière* and the improbable, long-lost mama of *Mon cœur à l'étroit*) never acquires the sharp contours of Tante Colette, of Lucie's nasty friend Isabelle, or of

Nadia's patronizing travel companion Nathalie. At one point early in *En famille*, Fanny asks a man who claims to have lain eyes on her aunt Léda's breast, what this mythical breast looked like: 'L'homme ne réussit à le décrier, manquant de vocabulaire. Alors, ses mains levées caressaient une forme invisible' (*EF*, 56). Léda, the dark fantasy breast, is yet another blank, then, as are all the 'representations' of Leda that are subsequently offered up for tantalizing consumption.²²

En famille is thus buried beneath an accumulation of absences. Not only is the reason for Fanny's exclusion erased, but so is the textual presence of pity, empathy and emotion. All the characters are reduced to the less than human embodiments of so many doll parts, none more than the figure standing for 'original' relationality, that of the mother, who emerges as a horrifying zombie. Figures to whom Fanny turns to replace the 'dead mother' are either livid, hard and rejecting (Tante Colette, Lucette, Tante Clémence) or else fantastical (Tante Léda). As for the moribund languor of all the various secondary characters, this seems to grow rather than diminish as the narrative advances. Already hopelessly passive in the flashbacks to her youth (she comes across during the excommunication of her loyal sister Léda as the most miserable of saps), by the end of the novel, Fanny's mother sinks to the position of a depressed and helpless child. Cousin Eugène, always characterized by his emptiness, dwells, in the novel's final pages, in a wardrobe from which he is too listless to emerge. Fanny's father is as distracted by the television when he first appears (*EF*, 37) as he is when incestuously seeking his 'improved' daughter's hand in marriage (*EF*, 244).

And yet, as we have seen, Fanny, psychically and physically indescribable though she may often be, *does*, on occasion, truly feel. She may well be the novel's only character with the capacity for feeling. But her flashes of intense feeling are constantly diverted into self-annihilating and *unfeeling* modes of behaviour. Rather than using her keen intelligence as a means of gaining true emotional or politicized insight into her situation, for example, she instead deploys it in the service of quasi-psychotic, pseudo-philosophical inquiry:

Seulement, quelques questions me viennent: personne ne me l'ayant ordonné, est-ce que je ne me suis pas trompée en décidant de partir à la recherche de Léda? Car est-ce qu'il n'était pas prévu que mes parents négligent d'inviter Léda, autrefois? Est-ce qu'il n'était pas plutôt dans l'ordre véritable que Léda soit tenue à l'écart de cette histoire familiale? Même, ne pourrait-ce pas être pour mon bien, personne ne le soupçonnant, et chacun agissant pourtant comme il le doit, que Léda fût

absente? Et ne suis-je pas en train de troubler ce qui m'est cher par-dessus tout, le bel ordre établi, les traditions, en croyant qu'on y a manqué? Vois-tu, toutes ces questions me trottent par la tête. (EF, 45)

Just as her initially promising capacities for thought are, in the final analysis, numbed through excessive instrumentalization, so is Fanny's sexuality blanked out through overuse. Offering her body to others for the sole purpose of integration, Fanny is unable either to take real pleasure in her sex and physical beauty or to use them in the relational creation of love. Her frenzied desire for her cousin Eugène is all about wanting to ingest him and what his body symbolizes, to feed off his proximity to the family and its unnameable whiteness:

Comme elle l'aimait! songeait-elle éblouie. Il lui semblait embrasser la vaste chair de Tante Colette, et le froid squelette de l'aïeule, même la carcasse des vieux chiens râpeux! Comme elle les aimait tous! Un coup violent dans le dos la fit suffoquer. Eugène, ayant dégagé ses poings, la frappait furieusement. Elle durcit la mâchoire, se frotta à lui jusqu'à ce qu'elle eût mal. (EF, 63)

On other occasions, Fanny's desire for Eugène is indistinguishable from a desire to *be* Eugène: 'Comme elle eût voulu, se blottissant contre lui, devenir Eugène lui-même' (EF, 65). In the same way, her 'friendship' for Lucette (yet another fundamentally depressed love-object) arises with ardour from the desire to be associated with qualities she associates with the family. The chance of such an association leads her to act, literally, like a dog, as she puts her chin on Lucette's knee (EF, 74), looks up to her as if she were a goddess (EF, 75), and throws herself, snapping furiously, at the man she thinks is attacking her mistress (EF, 106). All Fanny's sexual encounters are motivated by the belief that they will bring her closer to the whiteness that others refuse to believe she has a right to enjoy. Whether she is being mounted by a boy from the village or her uncle Georges, Fanny sees in every coupling a chance for integration. But Fanny's psyche during these racialized attempts at acceptance through sex enters an alarming *disintegration*. When she is with the lorry driver, his features pleasingly embodying the 'larges faces pourprées de la région' (EF, 119), fragments of blankness, buried memory and abuse come together in an awful maelstrom:

Les traits de l'homme s'estompait et, quand il se redressa et lâcha enfin Fanny, elle ne distinguait plus qui il était véritablement, de nombreux visage se mêlant dans sa mémoire, s'ingéniant à l'abuser. Pour ne pas risquer que sortît de sa bouche le nom de l'oncle Georges ou de son

propre père elle se tut. L'homme, content, dissertait. (EF, 120)

Fanny's one true opportunity for growth and transcendence of her family-orientated obsession arrives towards the end of the novel, in the form of her chance to become a good mother figure to the little girl who ends up serving as her messenger, and who is treated by the family as a punishable projection of Fanny, just as Fanny was, when younger, a punishable projection of Léda. Fanny's failure to protect the child from the family's abuse, despite the fact that this child would, it seems, do anything to make Fanny happy, signals the novel's inability to carry on existing, for it, like Fanny, gives up the ghost shortly thereafter. The description of the child-messenger's shame at her own maltreatment by the family and, even more alarmingly, her inability to conceive of herself and of her own injuries as *real* (EF, 279) sets up a third generation of blank suffering, taking the narrative into a zone of intolerable pain. For Fanny has not only transmitted her own form of self-annihilating psychosis to her little ward, but has also become complicit in the destruction of a child she should be protecting. Even when the girl has lost chunks out of her arm (EF, 281), Fanny chooses not to acknowledge the extent of the danger in which she is putting her, preferring instead to dwell in the old, reliable space of blankness so beloved by her own mother: that space which will permit her, in her turn, not to see, nor to feel, nor to intervene.

Suicide is Painless: *Un temps de saison* (1994)

Over three years passed before the publication of NDiaye's follow-up novel to *En famille*. NDiaye was busy during those years building her own family, giving birth (in 1991 and 1993) to a girl and a boy (a second son would follow in 1997). It is perhaps fitting, then, that in the relatively brief and pithy *Un temps de saison* – less than half the size of the epic *En famille* – NDiaye explores the situation of the nebulous outsider who, unlike Fanny, *does* manage, in a way, to 'settle down'. But if Herman, the maths teacher protagonist, can be said to achieve something like successful and potentially lasting integration in the village where he ends up after the mysterious disappearance of his wife and child, it is an integration on unknown, unfair and unstable terms.

Herman's decision to stay in the village and 'faire son trou' (UTS, 119) will necessitate the inexorable death of whatever personality he

can be said to have possessed in the first place. Unlike Fanny, Herman is willing to stop struggling like a dying fish on the end of a hook, to give in and simply to go with whatever flow is strongest.²³ He is also able, crucially, to ‘pass’ in ways that are seemingly closed off for Fanny, despite her best intentions. But Herman’s reward for semi-successful integration is far from enviable. Protagonists such as Fanny and the Woman wanted nothing more than to take refuge in hospitable cottages of blankness (Kalane, the grandmother’s house), where they fantasized vainly about being accepted by and interacted with by the houses’ various inaccessible denizens.²⁴ Herman’s provisional acceptance by Charlotte, Métilde, Gilbert and Lemaître and the other villagers, however, leads him towards a different kind of soul death. He may not be transformed into a log and he may not fade into a shadow-ghoul, but his growing feelings of dissolution, iciness and bodily liquefaction convey, in a by now recognizably ‘NDiayean’ mode of the fantastic, the sense of a slow, resigned disintegration: a suicide by numbers. Unable to capitalize on the various flattering hints thrown his way that suggest that he might, if he wanted, one day rise to the dizzy heights of Alfred and the mayor – themselves originally outsiders – he will simply fall apart, at first rotting from the inside (‘tout l’intérieur de son être lui semblait humide et mortifié, contracté, en voie de pourrissement’, *UTS*, 50), while by the final pages he appears to be actually melting: ‘Vous êtes fondu, littéralement fondu!’ (*UTS*, 135) exclaims his horrified father-in-law.

One of the main reasons for Herman’s rapid descent into dissolution appears to be a self-annihilating tendency he shares with the narrator of *La Femme changée en bûche*. Both protagonists take a certain comfort in the experience of losing control, of moving closer and closer towards a state resembling vegetation. The Woman reports a veritable pleasure in the sensation, or rather non-sensation, of becoming wooden, no longer subject to the vicissitudes of feeling. ‘Comme il faisait bon être bûche!’ (*FCB*, 154), she nostalgically recalls in the novel’s closing pages. While the log-state can be seen as mimetic of the end of life, the expression of a certain kind of existential failure (‘Quant à moi, je voulais bien échouer’, *FCB*, 12), it also seems to have the potential for catalysing a radical form of insight. As the Woman notes, it was only as a log that she was able to have the quasi-Buddhic realization that ‘tous les états se valent’ (*FCB*, 136). As we will later see in the case of the fantastically wounded and immobilized Ange in *Mon cœur à l’étroit* (2007), the unexpected descent into unthinkable passivity can be experienced as the

necessary regressive prelude to ethico-spiritual renaissance. In Herman's case, however, the letting go does not appear to promise rebirth of any kind. His will to fail, to be numb and soft like the alluringly languid Charlotte, floating amidst a 'déchéance paresseuse' (*UTS*, 93), 'somnolant par oisiveté' (*UTS*, 92), brings him deeper and deeper into a depression that seems to have no possibility of end.

Indifference and a blank addiction to habit set in at the start of the second half of the novel, as the narrator slides, in apparent sympathy with Herman, into a relentless use of the imperfect tense. Flaubertian descriptions of inexorable, deadened sinking begin to proliferate:

Il gagnait sa propre chambre, jetait un œil par la vitre.

[...]

Il sommeillait un peu, par désœuvrement.

[...]

Il tournait toute la journée dans l'hôtel, montait et descendait sans but, tentait d'accoster Charlotte, passait du temps à se cacher de Gilbert et de la mère. (*UTS*, 84–5)

It is in this third image of an aimless and fearful – but increasingly horny – Herman, prowling the staircases in search of an encounter with Charlotte, that the novel's most original theme emerges: in *Un temps de saison*, 'blankness' begins to take on a specifically sexualized hue. This is a novel that is ultimately focused on the depressive allure of promiscuity and prostitution in the wake of the 'original' familial abandonment or disappearance which we have now come to expect in NDiaye's texts. Alfred, the president of the 'comité des fêtes', establishes the blueprint for Herman's slide into vaguely sleazy torpor. Himself abandoned in the village by his wife many years previously, when she disappeared in exactly the same manner as Herman's wife and child (*UTS*, 96–9), the man he has become is fully 'integrated' – a status that is embodied by his dyed platinum-blond hair – and equally fully immersed in the pleasures of an unrestrained, multi-directional and resolutely unemotional lasciviousness. Unable to refrain from groping Herman ('Il posa sa main sur le genou de Herman et le serra un peu fort [...] Il le touchait fréquemment, du coude, du pied, comme sans y penser, et bientôt Herman n'y fit plus attention', *UTS*, 61), exactly as the secretary Pesta absent-mindedly paws the Woman in Kalane, Alfred is a staunch advocate (and connoisseur) of the village's systems of prostitution, recommending Charlotte's services (she is rented out, in the manner of the second Rose-Marie Carpe, by her mother) to Herman at

every available opportunity. Meanwhile, Gilbert's vassal-like status with regard to the powerful Lemaître has a strongly sexualized underlying dimension, the famous doubles tennis match at L. of which he speaks obsessively to Herman beginning, towards the novel's denouement, to take on the colours of a nightmarish orgy.

Herman 'loses' his wife Rose in much the same manner as Alfred allegedly lost his. Judging from the mayor's bizarre account of these kinds of unexplained cases of abandonment, the disappearing spouse – seeming, interestingly, always to be a woman – is afflicted by both a mysterious kind of 'répugnance' (*UTS*, 99) for their old life, a feeling which culminates in sudden withdrawal from their partner, and a quasi-suicidal breakdown: 'Sa détresse à ce moment-là, pensait le maire, devait être immense' (*UTS*, 98). It is difficult not to see in Herman's abandonment by Rose – who will, of course, return only in ghostly, dematerialized, utterly unresponsive form – yet another reworking of André Green's 'mère morte', with Herman as an infantile boy-man (he spends a large part of the novel sliding around in socks), suddenly deprived of his maternal wife when she can no longer provide him with the love on which he has unthinkingly depended. Unable to grieve her disappearance properly – his is precisely the 'blank' non-mourning recommended by Alfred (*UTS*, 107) – he will devote a suddenly hyper-eroticized non-energy to capturing the attention of two alternative wife-mother figures, Charlotte and Métilde. Even though the former is overtly sluggish, while the latter is ambitious and driven, the two women are equally unreachable at an emotional level, and exude a resolutely deadened air: Métilde's endless chatter about the need for the lackadaisical Charlotte to wake up and further her career (*UTS*, 77–8) feels just as disconnected as Valérie's appalling 'corporate-speak' in *La Femme changée en bûche*. And yet the infantilized Herman, bereft of family and in need of any attachment he can come by, clings in terror to these indifferent new potential caregivers: 'Il sentait du reste qu'il se devait d'afficher, pour le moment en tout cas, une complète allégeance à qui voulait bien s'occuper de lui [...] Car elle va m'aider, se répéta-t-il machinalement' (*UTS*, 47, 53)

Charlotte is a bewilderingly vacant character, something like a cross between Lewis Carroll's Dormouse and E. T. A. Hoffman's Olympia. On the rare occasions that she does react to anything it is with a broken doll-like quality: 'Charlotte eut un petit geste d'impatience qui s'acheva mollement, presque dans l'oubli de ce qui l'avait provoqué' (*UTS*, 49). And while Herman's initial appraisal is dismissive – 'Cette fille est

idiote, voilà tout' (*UTS*, 48) – it is her stupidly ghost-like dimension that he will come to find tantalizingly desirable:

Cette espèce de résignation placide qu'il prévoyait, qu'il lisait déjà dans ses traits immobiles, l'aiguillonnait douloureusement tandis qu'il montait l'escalier, le rendait à la fois nerveux et gai. Il dut faire pour ne pas redescendre immédiatement, empoigner Charlotte, faire monter à son visage cette expression soumise, dépourvue de regret et d'étonnement, pour lui si énigmatique. (*UTS*, 62–3)

Herman is enraptured by eroticized deadness. It arouses in him a sadistically sexual 'capacité de puissance et de cruauté infinie' (*UTS*, 63); in the face of its soft, insipid mediocrity, he feels positively clever and exciting. 'Elle charme en moi ce que j'ai de moins bon' (*UTS*, 86), Herman concludes, powerless to prevent the onset of a desire that can only be frustrating because it can find nothing in its slippery, stultified object to latch onto. Métilde is somewhat better at making Herman feel attended to – and indeed arrives in L. at the novel's denouement, ostensibly to protect him from total disintegration (*UTS*, 133) – yet throughout the novel she has, like her lover Gilbert, resolutely ignored his main problem, the trauma of his family's extinction:

Il savait très exactement alors quelle expression vague, indifférente ternirait le regard de Métilde, il connaissait jusqu'au ton précis de petit "Bof!" qui s'échapperait des lèvres soudain un peu molles de Gilbert.

Ce qui doit arriver arrivera, disait invariablement l'un ou l'autre. (*UTS*, 89)

The couple act exactly like the other villagers in their refusal to acknowledge the reality of anything resembling human feelings. Just as the novel's various Kafkaesque landladies, administrators and police officers pretend, robotically, not to hear what he is saying ('Le jeune homme hochait la tête, le coin de ses lèvres s'étira mécaniquement en un sourire bienséant et formel', *UTS*, 21), Herman's three youthful friends – who at the same time function for him as desired parent figures – can offer him only the most insubstantial of emotional nourishment.²⁵ Hyper-sexual zombies all three (the two women seem to be constantly fumbling with one another, and Gilbert's rapport with Herman has a more than seductive air), they make the more potentially solid work and relationship commitments of Herman's old life seem altogether boring, far too much like hard work, to the point that '[i] n'était pas loin d'estimer que la fruste existence immobile dans l'hibernation du village était la seule qui valût' (*UTS*, 87). The potentially abusive,

sexualized sluggishness of the four friends is echoed in the general village population, of course: we will later hear of families who sleepily watch pornographic films together, parents and children, over dinner (*UTS*, 114), while the case of a thirteen-year-old child's rape by her stepfather is ignored by the committee supposed to be discussing it in favour of gastronomic pleasures: 'On apporte les vol-au-vent et les plateaux de charcuterie' (*UTS*, 116).

Repeating Fanny's fatal mistakes, Herman comes to conceive of the village itself as the languid, tantalizing mother whom he has somehow failed to rouse to look after him: 'Est-ce que le village me reprendra? Est-ce que je pourrai seulement l'atteindre?' (*UTS*, 132). He takes upon himself the responsibility of not fitting in as he 'ought' ('Qui me pardonnera?', *UTS*, 132), accepting the implied necessity of his own partial 'death' if he is ever to attain a level of integration into this world of affectless wraiths. It is scarcely surprising, given the narrowness of options available to the protagonist, that this novel will find itself as unable to progress, to break new psychic ground for its exhausted characters, as the two that preceded it. The final sentences convey total breakdown at every level: Herman's material liquefaction sets in, the taxi taking him back to the village breaks down, and the narrative simply gives up the ghost:

Ah, ah, murmura Herman.

Mais la voiture s'arrêtait; le chauffeur jura, cogna sur le volant.

Ca y est, elle nous lâche! s'écria-t-il. (*UTS*, 142)²⁶

Far from staving off generalized disintegration, the various parent figures that clutter up the denouement – not only Lemaître and Métilde, but also Herman's randomly encountered father-in-law and mother-in-law – appear to precipitate it (just as the arrival of M. and Mme Carpe at Lazare's house will, in the later novel, drive a briefly rejuvenated Rosie under once and for all).

But even if this novel ultimately crashes under the weight of its protagonist's listless depression,²⁷ it nevertheless demonstrates, largely via its ingenious intrusions of uncanny or fantastical phenomena, a commitment to the aesthetic *disruption* of zombified fatigue. The reader feels truly curious – and thus, I would argue, truly alive – through injections of ghostly strangeness that the flattened characters themselves are unable to register as worthy of wonder. Rose's frustration and depression led, we were told, to her abdication from life, quickly followed by her spectral dematerialization (*UTS*, 95–100). Herman,

left behind to work somehow with the loss, does so by voiding it from his consciousness and himself becoming blank. The text in which his story is told, however, preserves the radical 'étrangeté' at the heart of his existence and thus remains, itself, in life. The depressed ghosts of Rose, Herman's child and Alfred's wife will not leave, will not be normalized, no matter how much the social machine attempts to ignore them (*UTS*, 117–19). Herman and the reader, like the narrator of the later *Autoportrait en vert*, are forced to register the phantoms' awful existence, to experience the sad horror they embody as inexplicable (perhaps), evanescent (certainly), but ineluctably *real*. These spectres represent a crucial psychic advance on the ungraspability at the heart of NDiaye's earliest fictions, showing us, as they do, that something terrible really has happened. They rather resemble the central features of the talkative taxi driver who speaks the novel's final words but who is, mysteriously, missing his nose. Like this old man's undescribed scar-tissue – new, necessary, unnameable flesh – NDiaye's ghosts are the remnants of wounds, drifting unapologetically across the middle of the novel's otherwise 'normotic' face.²⁸

Blankness/(Re)generation: The Second Novel Cycle

I saw some piglets suckling their dead mother. After a short while they shuddered and went away. They had sensed that she could no longer see them and that she wasn't like them anymore. What they had loved in their mother wasn't her body, but whatever it was that made her body alive.

Confucius, quoted in Manic Street Preachers, *Generation Terrorists*

At the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first, NDiaye's place in French culture underwent a significant metamorphosis, shifting from being a rising star of the avant-garde literary scene, adored by the critics but little known by the general public, to being a household name. The publication in February 2013 of her novel *Ladivine* was a highly anticipated cultural event, discussed in newspapers and magazines, on the television and on the radio. On the day of the novel's release, NDiaye's image was featured on the front page of the daily *Libération*. Her snowballing celebrity was certainly helped by winning the Prix Femina for *Rosie Carpe* in 2001, as well as the much-reported event of the hyper-traditional Comédie-Française taking on her multi-ethnic play *Papa doit manger* in 2003; but it was her Prix Goncourt win for *Trois femmes puissantes* in 2009, together with the incredibly high-profile spat the same month with the right-wing politician Eric Raoult (discussed in the Introduction) that made her famous.¹ Perhaps more importantly, it was during this period that NDiaye matured as a novelist, as well as developing into a playwright of note. If it had been clear from *En famille* onwards that NDiaye was not only an accomplished writer but one of no small cultural significance,

the novels *La Sorcière* (1996) and *Rosie Carpe* (2001), the play *Papa doit manger* (discussed in Chapter 3) and the strange 2005 photo-novella *Autoportrait en vert* (discussed in Chapter 4) established her as an artist who had carved out a truly original niche, no longer dependent on homage of any kind in the increasingly disturbing stories she was telling about family, identity and alienation. Michel Crépu wrote of *Rosie Carpe* that this was an

étape majeure, étape de mutation qui relègue les précédents romans au rang de préludes avant l'entrée en matière véritable. Un grand livre? Assurément, et comme il s'en trouve peu dans cette région dite du 'roman français', où l'on ne se lasse pas de guetter les signes du renouvellement. Eh bien, en voilà un, de signe. Un vrai. (Crépu, 2001)

Rosie Carpe was a greater critical and commercial triumph than anything NDiaye had hitherto published, resplendently occupying a mysterious, multi-faceted cultural niche – at once Parisian, provincial and Antillean, feminine, masculine and divine, futuristic, contemporary and retro – and exemplary of the then thirty-four-year-old NDiaye's gift for writing intellectually brilliant *and* emotionally devastating prose. If NDiaye appeared to remove herself from the spotlight in 2007, moving to Berlin with her husband Jean-Yves Cendrey and their three children, she nevertheless maintained a central place in the culture of the France she had left behind, appearing on the front covers of popular and 'cool' magazines such as *Les Inrockuptibles* with bewildering frequency for a personality generally considered to be 'retiring'. The immense popularity of *Trois femmes puissantes* in 2009, together with the much-discussed Claire Denis film *White Material* (starring Isabelle Huppert), for which NDiaye co-wrote the screenplay, cemented her position as an extremely high-profile 'name'.² It was also during this period that academics, particularly in the US and the UK, began to work in earnest on NDiaye's writing, turning it into an object of remarkably intense study. Dominique Rabaté's short but penetrating monograph, *Marie NDiaye*, appeared in French in 2008, accompanied by photographs, excerpts and a compact disc of interviews, whilst international conferences devoted to the discussion of NDiaye as writer and cultural phenomenon took place in London (2007 and 2013), Mannheim (2011) and Paris (2013).³

I want in this chapter to continue my close reading of the texts themselves, maintaining my focus on the question of 'blankness'. For blankness too undergoes something of a transformation, even if it never, ever, goes away. NDiaye's simultaneously droll and depressing

sixth novel *La Sorcière* (1996) marks the start of the major shift. The book initiates new tendencies at the level of thematic concern, form of representation, narrative and underlying psychic 'shape', use of symbolism and lexical, grammatical and syntactical style. These new tendencies are developed and intensified in *Rosie Carpe*, *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (2007) and *Ladivine*, as well as in the less impressive – though much-garlanded – *Trois femmes puissantes*. NDiaye's earlier novels *La Femme changée en bûche*, *En famille* and *Un temps de saison* had showcased vain and intelligent protagonists, struggling to attain recognition by social and familial structures whose refusal to hold, see or reflect them precipitated their ineluctable unravelling towards total psychic and physical disintegration. The Woman, Fanny and Herman all grapple with essentially adolescent – even if potentially politicizable – concerns. Youthful, solipsistic and, to all intents and purposes, single, these characters are far removed from the future-orientated preoccupations of parenthood.⁴ Dwelling, in the main, within nameless or mythical realms and locales such as 'Kalane' and 'les villages', they present the reader with little hope for the possibility of attaining a sense of reality, ending as they do in states of vegetation, gaseousness and semi-liquefaction. The novels of the second cycle, however, beginning with *La Sorcière*, carry out ever-deepening explorations of what it might mean to come closer to forms of reality and responsibility. Their protagonists must bring up children. At the crux of these protagonists' failure to provide secure environments for the creation of lasting bonds with their offspring is the glaring fact that they have not managed to resolve the issues of youthful blankness and disintegration set out in the first cycle of novels. The price to be paid for this lack of resolution is the loss of the family the protagonist has created to compensate for the failure of her 'original' one. This loss emerges as the supreme terror haunting NDiaye's second cycle of novels. Nothing truly alive can be effectively transmitted to the new generation so long as the deadness of the first familial relationships remains clogged and untreated. The only things NDiaye's new mothers and grandmothers can pass on to their anxious (later, hostile) children and grandchildren is trauma and despair.

Framed in this way, it would appear that this second cycle of novels by NDiaye is even bleaker than the first in its treatment of material and emotional unravelling, adding parental disappointment to the already significant 'curse' of individual dissolution. However, even if parent-child relationships in *La Sorcière*, *Rosie Carpe*, *Mon cœur à l'étroit*,

Trois femmes puissantes and *Ladivine* are generally blighted by the protagonist-parent's non 'worked through' neuroses, certain elements of that protagonist's subjectivity – elements lying outside her specifically parental function – are nevertheless offered occasional chances of something like 'healthy' development. A palpable emotional advance is made on the all-consuming, ghoulish horror that gnaws away at young Z, Judith's brother, Fanny, Herman and the unfortunate Woman of the earlier novels. These chances and advances take the form of glimpses of something I would like to call, following Giorgio Agamben (1993), a 'coming community'. Perhaps it is simply the beginning of a politicized consciousness. In this second cycle of NDiaye's novels, marginalized figures who are *not* members of the marginalized heroine's (non-marginalized) family but instead resemble dream-family figures, call out to her with ever greater insistence, practically shaking her into waking up, if only for an instant, to the (often explicitly dark-skinned) community that she has unconsciously rejected, whether or not she herself is dark-skinned, or sees herself as such. The motif is a fascinating one, at its peak of emotional power and nuance in the depiction of relationship between Rosie Carpe, Lagrand and Titi. It occasionally grates from an aesthetic point of view, and fails to convince from an ethico-political one: by the time *Trois femmes puissantes* appears, alienated *métisse* Norah's early glimpse of unrealized sorority in the form of the 'authentically' African housegirl Khady Demba has become a slightly bland trope. The topos is handled brilliantly in the flawed masterpiece *Ladivine* (2013), however, in which the second *Ladivine*'s growing awareness of a connection to a world of inexplicable beings, both human and non-human, is persuasive precisely because it eschews cultural specificity, essentialism or exoticizing sentimentality. If *Ladivine* Rivière is increasingly drawn towards strange women and dog-people, this is less about her 'finding her roots' (to deploy a well-worn cliché) and more about the inescapable, personalized return of aspects of her past which have been systematically buried, silenced or otherwise repressed.

However one assesses the politicized persuasiveness of the second cycle's trajectory towards a swarthy and 'positively' spectral community, what it underlines is a general tendency in NDiaye's writing towards new possibilities of naming. Her later novels work towards the representation of things that previously had been forced to dwell within the textual psychosis of blank non-symbolization. At the level of geography, for example, from *La Sorcière* onwards, places are suddenly able to be

articulated in real terms, whereas NDiaye's characters had previously drifted through generally unnameable regions of speechlessness.⁵ Thus Lucie moves between a perfectly locatable Poitiers, Bourges and Chateauroux; Rosie moves from Brive-la-Gaillarde to Paris's fifth arrondissement, and from Antony to Guadeloupe; Nadia begins her narrative in the chic, named streets of central Bordeaux,⁶ having begun her mostly blanked-out life in the working-class suburb of Aubiers; the characters of *Trois femmes puissantes* occupy locales that are totally recognizable (and sometimes named) as Dakar and Aquitaine; and Ladivine Rivière and her family find themselves in locations as diverse as Langon, Berlin and Warnemunde. Even if the unbearably hot holiday destination of the Global South in which Ladivine's family find themselves adrift is (like Nadia's climactic island destination) deprived of a name, there is a growing sense in the post-1996 writing that concepts and entities that were perhaps too embarrassing or overwhelming to be expressed linguistically in the earlier texts have somehow become more manageable. NDiaye's gradual shift towards the provision of shapes, names and signifiers for those aspects of existence which had previously eluded representation provides opportunities for a more directly politicized and therapeutic writing.⁷

This is a writing that is finally equal to the task of 'symbol formation' (cf. Segal, 1957), of *naming* the pain (or joy, or growth) of a subject whose ongoing oppression was perpetuated, in the earlier texts, precisely by his or her coy – or psychotic – speechlessness. Defying the republicanist 'ban' on the representation of blackness, a ban she had previously respected, NDiaye seemed to find a way to move forward that nevertheless did not force her to join the ranks of those 'postcolonial' French writers considered to be not French but 'francophone'. She retained her right to 'full Frenchness', at the same time becoming more commercially successful, getting better known by the general public, and cannily digging out a previously unoccupied hole on the cultural landscape, one that was recognizable as 'different', yet not so recognizable that it had to undergo immersion in racialized stereotype. In these later novels, the racialized bodies (of Lagrand, of Nadia, of Fanta) can be specified in their racialization, and the psychic violence of the act of racialization can – potentially – be more robustly critiqued. On the fiftieth page of *Ladivine*, the narrator – surveying the world from the white racist perspective of Clarisse/Malinka's *patronne* in the Bordeaux bistrot where she works – commits a shocking and unprecedented transgression in NDiaye's linguistic universe, in describing Clarisse's mother, Ladivine

Sylla, as a 'nègresse'. The gendered and sexualized body can be spoken about too (the phrase 'mon vagin' appears on p. 248 of *Mon cœur à l'étroit* with startling, strangely satisfying audacity), as can a richer, more diverse set of modern interactions, such as the unembarrassed gay relationship of Nadia's son Ralph with the policeman Lanton (the possibility of same-sex desire tends, in the earlier novels, to lurk anxious and unspoken). That is not to say, of course, that in finally naming these concepts and entities NDiaye's writing *automatically* graduates towards a greater level of insight or politicization. I would strongly argue, for example, that the nebulous accusations of Tante Colette in *En famille* reveal significantly more about the logic of racialized wounding than the rather heavy-handed subplot involving Rudy Descas's murderous, colonialist father in the central section of *Trois femmes puissantes*, even if the family's machinations in the earlier novel can never be demonstrably proven to be grounded in racialized psychosis.

Finally, in this second cycle of more simply, more starkly written novels, the unspeakable inner deadness of protagonists such as the Woman – a deadness that is impossible to shift since it refuses to name itself or to be seen, until it is too late, until the self has literally turned into wood – begins to be converted into abjectly concrete, even corporeal symptoms.⁸ These symptoms can at last be seen and investigated in the body of NDiaye's new naming and showing text. They are symptoms that can precipitate, through horror, a kind of genuine recognition, and perhaps even lasting psychic change. Rosie's and Nadia's inexplicable, pseudo-fantastical foetuses are more than mere postmodern homage to the Immaculate Conception crossed with *Rosemary's Baby*, just as the streams of Lagrand's and Norah's urine at key moments of insight function – like Lucie's streams of watery blood-tears in *La Sorcière* – in a more specifically soulful manner than the various instances of transgressive oozing in the writing of Georges Bataille. In these later novels, some of NDiaye's protagonists finally start to convert the blankness from which they have emerged into strange but potentially warm and useful substances, fantastical solids and liquids which they may behold and expel, and even merge with. And when Ladivine Rivière finally finds herself entering the muddy, sweaty skin of the brown dog who has tracked and watched over her, the abjection of the experience is resurrectional in its concrete, sensuous realness.

All Cried Out: *La Sorcière* (1996)

In the unforgettable opening sentence of *La Sorcière*, NDiaye sets out in clear and unambiguous terms what will prove to be a thematic constant in all the novels that follow – the difficult challenge of transmitting knowledge, love and survival skills to one’s children: ‘Quand mes filles eurent atteint l’âge de douze ans, je les initiai aux mystérieux pouvoirs’ (S, 9). The narrator Lucie’s immediately foregrounded concern with her twin daughters’ physical growth and cultural development – how they will or will not take whatever it is that she may be trying to give them – highlights the *fil rouge* running through NDiaye’s writing from *La Sorcière* onwards: the question of whether or not a clearly disturbed protagonist will manage to rise to the parental challenge of producing healthy, functional, non-rejecting offspring, with whom an inter-generational bond can be demonstrated. Sadly, the parent–child couples or groups explored in this series of novels tend to be largely unsuccessful in meeting the requirements of such wholesome union. If the hapless Lucie finds that she has literally ‘raised ravens’ in the cold and rapacious form of her abandoning witch-daughters Maud and Lise, the mothers and fathers of subsequent texts fare little better in the establishment of loving links with their children.

Careful dissection of the familial phenomena depicted in *La Sorcière* reveals this short novel to contain all the paradigms of abandonment, indifference and abuse that are played out in more macabre form elsewhere in NDiaye’s œuvre. *La Sorcière* also reveals more effectively than all the other texts – perhaps precisely because of Lucie’s curious quality of bland, blank understatement – the essential deadness that is to be found at the heart of the NDiayan family. Lucie’s portrait of her own family life – her relationships with husband Pierrot and twin daughters Maud and Lise and with her own divorced parents – is shadowy, blurred and increasingly suspect. The more Lucie’s tendency to ignore, repress and deform reality becomes clear, the more difficult it becomes to accept as truthful her account of the various changes, fragmentations and scenes of abandonment which take place. Instead, the reader is offered a patchy tale of inexplicable coldness and casual betrayal, beneath the surface of which seems to lie a pain that, not unlike the stigmatized shame of witchcraft itself – metonymically captured in the fleeting image of a half-glimpsed serpent’s tail – simply cannot be represented head on.

Lucie’s sudden and unexpected *idée fixe* (S, 64) regarding the necessity to reunite her divorced parents is what functions, in the last two-thirds of

the novel, as the narrative's indication that something in her perception and understanding of her own life is awry. Her commitment to the forcible reconstitution of a family unit that has come apart of its own accord, and to the fantasmatic re-instigation of an idealized parental security, even as her own marriage falls apart, her daughters slip away from her, and her capacity for economic survival breaks down, is related without the least reflection as to the folly of the enterprise. Despite everything in the narrative pointing towards the inappropriateness – the insanity even – of her attempting to bring two people back together who have chosen to continue their lives separately, Lucie pursues her project to the end, ignoring warnings from her distant mother, the manifestly untrustworthy attitude of her father, and the emotional and material traumas currently taking place in her own life, which are, on the whole, experienced by her without discernible reaction.

That Lucie's attempts to reunite her parents will culminate in her father's transformation (by her mother) into a snail – and her already chilly mother's wordless disappearance – is a typically cruel instance of NDiayan irony. It demonstrates, as do so many of the unhappy fates of her protagonists (who usually end up alone, despite their best efforts to hang onto something unsalvageable), the ultimate ludicrousness of an attachment to the icy bonds of a 'dead' family. For Lucie's families – both the one she comes from and the one she creates with Pierrot – are rotting, in fact, long before they officially break apart. What pain or horror lies beneath their deadness is impossible to know, since it is buried beneath the defences erected by Lucie's blank narration. It may be, of course, that no horrors as such exist, merely years of repressed unhappiness, isolation and rage. The important point gradually brought out by NDiaye's emotionally ungraspable narrative, however, is that Lucie's is a consciousness that has developed with the purpose of nullifying all feelings that exceed its increasingly affectless capacities.

In her interactions with her parents, husband, daughters, neighbour and mother-in-law, Lucie's attitude is one of a near-constant passivity, martyred masochism, false gaiety, and silent, fearful resentment. Her infantile admiration of the bullying, abusive neighbour Isabelle manifests itself in a simpering smile, spontaneously designed to reassure Isabelle of the impossibility of any potential hostility, no matter how rude, invasive or abusive Isabelle shows herself either to Lucie or to Isabelle's defenceless child Steve. NDiaye's skill in normalizing the narrator's acceptance of (and collaboration in) her own – and others' – abuse is startling in its understated naturalness. The reader in turn

quickly accepts the implied violence and menace of Lucie's encounters with Isabelle, sometimes giggling before Lucie's hypocritically timid politeness, but more often simply turning the page in order to see what will happen next in the cringe-worthy encounter. The 'working through' of an emotional reality is subordinated, then, by both Lucie and the reader, to the dubious pleasures of following a demented and often plain silly 'shaggy-dog story'. Lucie's attitude towards both her husband Pierrot and his mother – this character is referred to throughout as 'la maman' – is also stifled, repressing any expression of anger or confrontation. When Pierrot is aggressive with her in the presence of his colleague Monsieur Matin, Lucie refuses all open discussion with him, merely confiding to the reader her indifference ('Je me moquais bien de Pierrot à cet instant', *S*, 45) or nervousness ('Mais pourquoi diable avais-je peur de Pierrot, me demandai-je pour la énième fois', *S*, 35). As for 'la maman', her assertions that Lucie has no right to complain about Pierrot's theft from the couple's savings account is met with a resounding silence. Lucie is preoccupied, above all, with maintaining a reassuring cordiality of relations between herself and the domineering old woman: 'Je ne voulais pas me fâcher et lui caressai la main' (*S*, 109).

What soon becomes clear is that there is in Lucie a behavioural mechanism that makes acknowledgment or discussion of any difficult emotional reality impossible. The reader watches this charming narrator dodge argument after argument, refusing all discussion of how she or anybody else might be feeling. She prefers, at all times, to feign harmony and joy, always with the goal of placating the vaguely threatening – and potentially abusive – 'grown up' to whom she can play 'good little girl'. Offering the rabid Isabelle another martini (one thinks of Fanny's mother in *En famille*, serving aperitifs as her daughter is ripped apart by the grandmother's dogs), Lucie half-explains her masochistic logic: 'Et je parlais avec enjouement, ne pouvant encore m'affranchir du besoin dégradant de contenter cette fille peu aimable, acrimonieuse et rusée' (*S*, 21). While one might argue that such a personality is simply restrained and non-confrontational (there being no need to condemn peacefulness after all, especially in fictional characters), the point that needs to be underlined here is the way in which NDiaye subtly exposes the link between Lucie's 'niceness' and her capacity to collaborate in the most alarming forms of abuse. It is because Lucie is so desperate to please Isabelle – and herself to remain in the role of helpless child – that she is not able to intervene in Isabelle's sadistic torture of Steve. Confiding only to the reader the reality of her nobly appalled sentiments ('Qu'as-tu

fait là, Isabelle, pensai-je alors, soudain glacée', *S*, 92), and all the while acknowledging in her narration that she actually conceives of poor Steve as a 'malheureux garçon' (*S*, 72), noting his 'visage apeuré, déformé par l'appréhension constante' (*S*, 91), to Isabelle herself Lucie continues to speak 'douceMENT, le cœur serré' (*S*, 73). By allowing her narrator the observational skills to notice the child's abuse in the first place, but denying her the strength to do anything to register her opposition to it, NDiaye manages to create a dully sickening reading experience, in which both reader and narrator become trapped within a collusive situation which they cannot ignore but which they are somehow too listless to intervene in.

Lucie's energy is positively boundless when placed in the service of the hare-brained parental reunion plan. But when it comes to taking responsibility for the abuse of Steve, her inexplicable fatigue ('je me sentais trop lasse pour tâcher de le rassurer', *S*, 25) not only prevents her from intervening on behalf of the child, but also seems capable of itself metamorphosing into vague cruelty. In what is one of the most oddly upsetting passages in the novel, Lucie goes to attend to Steve in her toilet: he has, according to Maud and Lise, 'pissé partout sur le siège' (*S*, 25). Despite an initial attempt to smile at the terrified boy, Lucie finds herself displaying involuntary anger when suddenly assailed by a supernatural future-vision of Steve as a young man:

Et l'expression de son visage à ce moment me parut si veule, sa bouche si aigre, que je ne pus réprimer un mouvement d'humeur envers le petit Steve dont je devrais encore essayer l'urine sur le siège des toilettes, sur le carrelage, tout de suite avant que Pierrot ne rentrât [...] Je le secouai un peu et lançai:

Oui, tout de même, tu pourrais faire attention, tu es grand maintenant.
(*S*, 26)

Even if she is overcome immediately by feelings of shame at her words and actions, Lucie's expression of aggression towards the child remains shocking, not least in a character who apparently lacks all capacity for anger or aggression in situations where such things might actually be appropriate.⁹ Incongruous moments such as this, nested, then buried, within a larger, self-created narrative of basic kindness and 'good' maternal feelings, are clues that something is not quite right, that Lucie's psyche contains feelings which are unacceptable to her and which are accordingly 'split-off' in such a way that she will not have to confront them. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the reader's

attentiveness when approaching a self-deceiving narrative like Lucie's: it is all too easy to ape the way in which she 'blanks out' what she does not want to see (or to have seen). The result of such denials and repressions is an ever-growing confusion in attempting to follow the logic of a story in which the other characters appear to treat Lucie with such inexplicable meanness. For while it is perfectly possible that Lucie genuinely does find herself on the receiving end of various intolerably cruel or ungrateful interactions, it is crucial to point out the function of her own paranoid fantasy-work in the creation of relationships from which she will emerge, ineluctably, as the harmless, abandoned victim.

The way in which Lucie represents her relationship with her 'rejecting' daughters Maud and Lise is particularly interesting when we try to scratch beneath the surface of her narration and to gauge what kinds of thoughts and emotions it blocks the reader from experiencing. Taking Lucie's narration at face value, the reader comes away with the impression that she is a devoted mother, aiming to cater to the whims and caprices of two pre-pubescent minxes, while at the same time making sure that she hands down to them the precious supernatural gifts that were once handed down to her. Rewarded for her efforts with ever-mounting coolness and disdain, and finally abandonment, Lucie cuts a sad figure indeed, a sort of postmodern, suburban *Mère Goriot* or *Mildred Pierce*, punished for wanting to do good, for trying to be a kind and generous mother, the well-meaning victim of two cold, cruel and ungrateful daughters. There is something odd about all this, though. Lucie's portrait of her daughters is dishonest in the way it sets the girls up as fundamentally sinister, callous – in short, unlikeable – while never actually admitting that this is what it is doing. Lucie never utters a word in explicit terms that might suggest that she is judging her daughters and finding them morally wanting, or that she is disappointed with them, or sad, or angry. Instead she insists at one level of the narrative on a sort of pure, unsullied love for Maud and Lise, a love that is seemingly indestructible despite the many slights and knockbacks it appears to receive, while at a disavowed level of the story-telling she creates a caricatural portrait of two pretty, little, over-privileged she-devils whom she at times fears, envies and hates.

Again and again, the reader is silently invited to condemn the girls' rapaciousness, materialism and blasé indifference to the world and its wonders – but the accumulation of such nasty characteristics ends up feeling unconvincing. How did Maud and Lise develop characters such as these? And if Lucie really does care for her daughters in emotionally

real terms, why is she so incapable of describing them in any way other than the most flagrantly inhuman? Lucie seems convinced of the girls' unshakable sense of their own superiority over her, of the essentially condescending nature of their feelings – these are things she never questions for an instant – but it is difficult to say how much of this conviction is grounded in paranoia or self-fulfilling prophecy. All we can say is that, as far as Lucie is concerned, her girls are surrounded by an air of impenetrability, an incapacity for disinterested love, and a potential for sudden acts of violence. Lucie will never be allowed into their private world. And yet, given that these experiences of exclusion and abandonment are precisely the kinds of problems that Lucie contends with vis-à-vis her own parents, one must wonder whether she is not repeating the very feelings she has failed to name and work through in her capacity as a daughter onto those she now relates to as a mother.

The problem is insoluble. Lucie is, in a way, even more resistant to analysis than physically neglectful or abusive mother-protagonists, such as the eponymous Rosie Carpe or Nadia, the delusional narrator of *Mon cœur à l'étroit*. All we can say of Lucie's account of maternal experience is that it is peculiarly one-dimensional, and that she is the one who emerges from it as the 'child', the one who needs looking after, rather than the actual minors of the narrative, Maud and Lise, who are assumed by their parents (just as Monsieur Matin's son Nounou is, and just as Isabelle's Steve is) to be tough, strong and not in particular need of love, guidance or protection. Blankly reflecting on Pierrot's hostile feelings towards his half-witch daughters, Lucie proclaims that

Je ne me faisais guère de souci pour les filles, tant il me semblait que nulle différence de nuances dans les confuses manifestations de tendresse qu'il avait pour elles ne pourrait affecter leur vitalité opiniâtre, avare, tendue vers des promesses et des espoirs qui allaient bien au-delà de nous deux, leurs parents, et se moquaient de nos propres petits objectifs laborieusement atteints. Non, de ce point de vue, rien ne les toucherait. (S, 16)

Lucie's random encounter in town with a woman 'au long vêtement jaune' (S, 55), who inexplicably hails her as 'ma sœur' (S, 55), functions as the text's whispered suggestion that there may be a world of potential 'sisters' outside the confines of Lucie's failed kinship and non-community, people by whom she might actually be welcomed. Such figures had, of course, existed for Fanny in *En famille* in the form of 'ethnic' young

Georges and his friendly family, but they she had experienced with more or less revulsion. Lucie's reaction to the strange woman, while still ambivalent, is nevertheless tinged with something rather closer to desire and regret, as she finds herself waiting outside the woman's crumbling building, 'frissonnant dans mon imperméable, espérant vaguement je ne sais quoi – que la femme ressorte, qu'elle m'apostrophe encore de cette manière si agréable, sûre d'elle et désintéressée? Pouvait-elle être, cette étrangère, ma sœur d'une façon ou d'une autre, et comment le savait-elle?' (S, 56). Even if neither the reader nor Lucie will ever meet the uncanny dark 'sister' again, she lingers, like Lucie's watery, bloody tears of effort and occasional insight, in the margins of the text's unconscious, offering the spectral glint of a belonging that Lucie might have had if only her circumstances had been different, if only she could have blocked out less of her own experience, if only she could have acted in her own best interests.

A Boy's Best Friend is his Mother: *Rosie Carpe* (2001)

At the centre of the monumental *Rosie Carpe* cowers Rosie's heart-breaking relationship with her only son Titi, a child conceived in the Parisian suburbs while his parents are shooting a pornographic film, consigned to oblivion by his soulless shell of a father, Max, and exposed to death by starvation, battery, sunstroke and poisoning, all before his sixth birthday. That Rosie, herself a victim of unnamed parental horrors, is so often clearly 'doing her best' by the child is perhaps the most distressing aspect of the relationship, in which mother and son drift across the world together in an eerie pseudo-alliance that resembles neither love nor loyalty but instead an eternal pact of ghostly depersonalization. I want to focus on what I consider to be the most remarkable feature of *Rosie Carpe*, namely its epic evocation of Rosie's hollowed-out consciousness. I want to consider the implications of that hollowness for thinking and writing about a subject who has been damaged not only by the unspeakable injuries of her own childhood but also by her adult collusion with the rules of a psychotic society that insists on the blanking out of whatever abuse its subjects may have experienced, or may still be experiencing. Rosie's blankness cries out to be read within a context of unarticulated childhood suffering, not least since one of its major narrative repercussions is the suffering of her child Titi.¹⁰ I shall consider first the gaps in Rosie's sense of self and in the narrative

itself, before exploring how those gaps enable the text's and the protagonist's preparation of a boy-child who will be made psychically (and nearly physically) to 'die' in the same way as his self-effacing mother. Finally, I shall consider the Carpe family's blankness in conjunction with its whiteness: the two differently false – psychic and social – states coagulate, in NDiaye's provocative and radically politicized vision, to form a new state of racialized zombification, which only the relatively 'alive' – and significantly 'black' – figure of Lagrand comes close to outrunning.

Perhaps the first area of deadness we need to note in *Rosie Carpe* is to be found at the level of the text itself. The various branches of the novel's structure, lexical patterns and even grammar and syntax are unstable and often hollow, at times giving the reader little or nothing to perch on or cling to. As Lydie Moudileno (2006) points out, especially with regard to conjunctions and connectors, so much of the language in this novel is useless and ultimately confusing, appearing superficially to perform a meaningful function but, upon closer inspection, disintegrating and 'discombobulated', the container of nothing but its vain hopes for signification. Pierre Lepape notes that while the expected contract between reader and fictional text is that the latter will offer the former some vaguely solid narrative which s/he may hook on to, the hapless reader of *Rosie Carpe* 'ne colle pas' (Lepape, 2003: 43). I would argue that NDiaye's shifting, tantalizing text thus acts upon the reader in the same way as the unstable and tantalizing parent figures within the world of the novel act upon their children. Appearing to offer solidity to the confused beings who depend upon them, both parents and language reserve the right to collapse or disappear at the moment when they are most needed. Maud Fourton (2004) claims that the novel's bizarre opening word 'mais' – harking back to a prior statement that can be neither shown or known – announces a false start that mocks the notion of origins or the possibility of grasping them, while the book's insouciantly 'tacked-on' denouement, in which Rosie finally gets to have her wedding, equally mocks the epic-romantic-novelistic fantasy of closure, solidity and resolution. Fourton's article brilliantly analyses the way in which this novel's structure seems to be splintered at every possible level, at one point dissecting a fourteen-line sentence that appears to be in the throes of self-decomposition. Ultimately, Fourton underscores a horrible irony: while the protagonists Rosie and Lagrand, haunted by the fear of their own lack of firmness, seek a safely familial place in which to house their increasingly fragmented self, the 'family

home' in which they eventually find themselves – a strangely 'un-dead' novel called *Rosie Carpe* – is itself false, unanchored and disintegrating, yanking and tearing at its vulnerable characters with such a ferocity that on the final page Lagrand must fantasize Old Man Carpe's floating, disembodied head with the kind of helpless passivity that characterizes nearly all NDiaye's wretched protagonists.

Never in all NDiaye's writing does she so methodically explore the failure of the textual container to do its work of containment. If the novel's deceitful forms and shapes serve as a grimly ironic reminder that the external structures sought out as shelter by the subject in disarray may prove to be his or her undoing, the protagonists' 'insides' are no more securely joined up. *Rosie Carpe* takes NDiaye's trope of generalized amnesia, a mental-emotional state of such radical disconnectedness that it is difficult even to speak of a real or meaningful self, to terrifying new heights. As Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield puts it,

Si tous [les protagonistes chez NDiaye], comme Rosie, vivent la difficulté de leurs rapports familiaux comme la catachrèse d'une relation tendue avec un réel énigmatique et arbitraire, aucun n'atteint un tel degré d'aliénation et de passivité [...] Rosie n'est donc pas, dans le roman, la narratrice de son propre trauma. Elle a beau parler, se raconter, elle n'a accès ni à son expérience, ni à la littéralité d'un véritable témoignage. (Arnould-Bloomfield, 2013)¹¹

Throughout the novel, the reader is given the sense that Rosie's consciousness is cosmically split, that she has so thoroughly buried a part of herself that what remains of her is zombified, ghostly, swathed in thick layers of disquieting forgetfulness. Immense sections of personality, affect and the capacity for living relationality appear to have been lost for ever. If some of NDiaye's earlier protagonists (*En famille*'s Fanny being the paradigmatic example) resembled novelistic cousins of Cervantes's Don Quixote, Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau, Kafka's K. or Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman in their odd combination of psychic emptiness and simultaneously obsessive focus on objects of fantasmatic desire, Rosie Carpe comes one step closer to epic literary blankness, her desires never attaining the coherence, concentration or drive even of those earlier 'zombies', instead merely dribbling out at odd moments of misplaced determination, as when she resolves to discover the name of the father of her third foetus, to telephone the mysterious Marcus Calmette, or to see the new *Astérix* film as her young son lies dying.

The opening lines of the second section of *Rosie Carpe*, evoking a

future (quasi-) memory via imperfect habitual and past anterior tenses, bears a resemblance to the opening lines of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (another novel about a perverse family in the colonies and afflicted with a terrible compulsion to forget and repeat):

Bien longtemps après que les années de Brive-la-Gaillarde se furent écoulés, et même longtemps après que les années de Brive se furent réduites à une longue période constante, brumeuse, d'un jaune pâle et uni, dans sa mémoire, Rosie devait prendre l'habitude de parler de cette époque de Brive, et d'y penser, comme à la plus harmonieuse de son existence, malgré le peu de souvenirs qui lui en restaient, malgré l'incertitude particulière, la sorte étrange de voile jaune qui enveloppaient le passe de Brive. (RC, 55)¹²

While readers of García Márquez's novels have become – perhaps excessively – accustomed to reading that author's textual emphasis on moments of remembering and forgetting through a larger cultural narrative about Latin America, collective amnesia, blocked out genocide and compressed time-zones, the reader of NDiaye's novel may find it more difficult to filter the text's allusions to Rosie's ungraspable history through a handy anthropological lens.¹³ Chronic amnesia, blackouts and the ignorance of origins and childhood remain, in *Rosie Carpe*, a personal affair. Why can Rosie not remember anything about Brive apart from its 'yellowness' and the fact that back then she was called 'Rose-Marie'? The narrator's insistence on the simple, non-negotiable resistance of Rosie's past to present itself in clearer terms is unsettling, and is one of the many things about this narrative that the reader is simply forced to accept if s/he wants to carry on reading. Rosie's world is one in which the past's elusiveness will render the present perennially blurred and disconnected. She drifts through her own psychic and physical landscape 'lointaine, l'œil vide, ne se comprenant plus très bien et indifférente, vide' (RC, 56). Unable to remember the surname of Max – the father of her child Titi – even though her relationship with him lasts a number of years, Rosie is framed by the narrator in quasi-psychotic terms, appearing unable, on occasion, to grasp even the fact that she is this woman named Rosie Carpe: 'Il lui semblait que l'existence de Max n'avait pas d'autre but ni d'autre sens que celui-ci, ce jour du mois d'août: faire comprendre à Rosie Carpe qu'elle était bien Rosie Carpe' (RC, 79).

The narrator's characterization of Rosie – her failure to experience

herself *as* herself, her feelings of unreality, the way in which her default mode is to be cut off from feelings, affect and emotions – at times so closely resembles writings by psychotherapists on blank psychosis, the false self and schizoid dissociation that NDiaye's text demands to be considered as a remarkably careful account of highly specific forms of personality death. The symptoms Rosie displays are classic hallmarks of the adult whose experience of childhood has been so traumatic that the only means of a kind of psychic survival lies, paradoxically in killing off feeling, ego and often representation itself. Like a number of other NDiayan protagonists, Rosie's intense spots of pain and odd flashes of rage lurk so obscurely beneath the layers of opacity piled high by character and narrator alike that when they emerge they do so within a context of mystery and non-explication. A suicidal image comes to Rosie in a moment of particularly acute despair, but it is quickly snuffed out, the spilled red throat-blood of her fantasy – at last a concrete representation of pain! – instantly channelled back into the more socially acceptable smiles and blushes of mild embarrassment (RC, 144–5). When, towards the end of the main part of the novel, Rosie looks in a mirror and sees 'une tête de brebis aux yeux foncés, aux petites oreilles aplaties, au regard effaré et implorant' (RC, 349), the reader can be in no doubt that this is a protagonist for whom psychotic breakdown is a real and terrifying possibility. But for the vast majority of the novel Rosie's madness is neutralized, deadened, blank, expertly diverted into the unreadable confusion of a smiling face that remembers only that its childhood was 'yellow'.

In *Rosie Carpe*, all paths of inquiry lead back to the blankly perverse Carpe family and to its bizarre power, whether in absence or in presence, to make Rosie experience the world in alternately panic-stricken and 'split-off' modes. The colour yellow functions in the text as a perplexing catalyst for feelings (or non-feelings) – apparently associated with Rosie's childhood – which are simultaneously intolerable, overwhelming and inaccessible to knowledge.¹⁴ These feelings cling to Rosie even when she and Lazare have moved to Paris, or Antony, or Guadeloupe, sticking in her throat like 'boure jaune' (RC, 60), penetrating her skull in 'une fulgurance de lumière jaune [...] cherchant à lui rappeler quelque chose' (RC, 76), or else clogging up her mouth, eyes and nose with their figurative 'boue jaunâtre' (RC, 328). When Lazare speaks the place-name 'Brive' – his metonymic expression for the parents who can be directly alluded to even by him only with difficulty – we are told that 'l'esprit de Rosie se combla de jaune' (RC, 109), whilst upon encoun-

tering her blank-gazed 'new' mother in the quiet streets of Antony, Rosie has 'l'impression qu'un objet chaud, jaune, pelucheux lui barrait la gorge' (RC, 149). In addition to provoking these strange feelings of invasive penetration by yellowness, encounters with her mother in particular appear to cause Rosie such (largely unarticulated) emotional distress that she experiences herself in a state of dissolution, a suddenly fragmented subject being torn to pieces, even though, in this text, there are no dogs to do the work of literal dismemberment.

Commentators on NDiaye's work rarely discuss child sexual abuse, except if they are referring to her husband Jean-Yves Cendrey's real-life citizen's arrest of a local 'paedophile' in their Normandy village.¹⁵ This general reticence in discussing the prominent role of (often incestuous) attacks on children and teenagers throughout NDiaye's writing itself is surprising, though, especially given its increasingly explicit representation in a number of texts (e.g. *En famille*, *Un temps de saison*, 'Les Garçons', *Les Grandes Personnes*). When reading *Rosie Carpe*, it is difficult, unless one is trying particularly hard, not to experience the Carpes as a family who, for unspecified reasons, are soaked in an atmosphere of virtual incest. The dizzying configurations of inter-generational coupling and marriage in the second half of the novel are perplexing enough, as Monsieur and Madame Carpe amicably 're-partner' with a teenage girl and her father, Lisbeth and Alex Foret.¹⁶ Lisbeth will go on to marry Titi, the grandson of her former partner Old Man Carpe and once the small boy for whom she acted as nursemaid. Titi will meanwhile keep his now ageing mother Rosie as a prize untouchable possession, guarding her with a jealousy that borders on dementia. Yet even before the familial relationships have reached this advanced stage of quasi-incestuous strangeness, the reader is confronted with glimpses of behaviour which may strike him or her as troubling, yet resistant to interpretation. When Rosie and Max are filmed having sex (and conceiving Titi) by the middle-aged female porn producer, for example, we are told that this kindly yet sickeningly invasive woman reminds Rosie of her mother (RC, 83). It is an incongruous association which would doubtless pass unnoticed were it not for the multitude of similar moments which either border on incestuous fantasy or signal a propensity within Rosie to find herself in sexualized situations that are both linked to family members and experienced as indigestible. When, one night, her brother Lazare has a girlfriend over to visit the flat he shares with Rosie in Paris, the (non-?) event is again wrapped in a three-layered membrane of potential abuse, spectral incest and blanked-out

oblivion. Whatever Lazare does to make the girl flee so abruptly is never explained, and Rosie 's'endormit sans doute' (RC, 66) during the elided – we presume sexually violent – activity. Prior to the (non-?) event, Lazare's bedroom door has been, we are told, left half-open, so that a horribly inappropriate ray of light emerging from it falls on Rosie's bed 'comme une invite' (RC, 66). Rosie's subsequent sleepy contemplation of her fearful, fuming, naked brother in the doorway ends the literally shadowy episode, about which we shall never find out anything more, but which nevertheless insinuates itself impertinently into the brief period of Rosie's and Lazare's domestic life together.

Rosie (often accompanied by the simultaneously prudish and perverse narrator) 'blanks out' constantly whenever she is close to sexual activity, and it seems to make little difference whether she is physically involved in it or not. She becomes momentarily deaf as one snowy morning Lazare discusses his project for selling sex toys in Guadeloupe with his best friend (or alter ego?) Abel:

Puis il lui sembla qu'elle portait les mains à ses oreilles dans une tentative ultime pour ne plus les entendre, que, de nouveau, elle s'attachait à fixer des yeux la fenêtre sombre et immobile (« il ne neige plus », se dit-elle) au-delà de Lazare, son frère Lazare que était revenu la voir [...] Et elle se rendit compte qu'en vérité ses mains ne bougeaient pas [...] mais c'était comme si elle avait bouché ses oreilles réellement car elle ne les entendait plus ni l'un ni l'autre [...] de même qu'elle ne les voyait pas, regardant et regardant la vitre obscure, humide, figée, son cœur et le cœur de l'enfant mêlant leurs pulsations furtives et alarmées. (RC, 165)

Her passive involvement in the filming of pornography (during the conception of Titi) and a drunken orgy or gang rape (during the conception of her third foetus) does not seem to be in conflict with this radical psychic 'absence' at the moment of sexual activity (or sexual violence) . It is as if Rosie's sexualized being has become so supremely divorced from the rest of her (whatever that 'rest' can be said to consist of) that it can only exist pornographically, as it were, obscenely split off from any more joined-up, coherent, 'human' conception of self. When she becomes pregnant for the second time, both the conception (with a neighbour) and the abortion (which is briefly misremembered as a stillbirth) are buried beneath 'l'alcool absorbé à cette époque-là, l'espèce de brume dense et lente qui avait enveloppé son esprit' (RC, 182). So casual and fleeting are the allusions to these events (which are nested within a gerundive clause and brief parenthesis in a single sentence of a three-page paragraph) that the reader too struggles to remember

that Rosie was ever pregnant in between giving birth to Titi and the mysterious gestation she announces upon her arrival in Guadeloupe at the beginning of the novel. NDiaye's writing itself mimics and elicits the processes of blankness and repression, then, drawing the reader into precisely the same problems of forgetting and foreclosure that afflict her protagonists. As for the third pregnancy, it too comes about at a moment of radical unconsciousness and splitting: 'Était alors arrivé, hors de sa conscience, au corps de Rosie Carpe davantage qu'à elle-même, ce qui l'avait fait, incroyablement, se trouver enceinte' (*RC*, 188). The mystery of this third conception is one of the most disturbing episodes of a novel full of disturbing episodes. Rosie's uncertainty as to how and by whom she has become pregnant is horrible enough, but to that must be added her uncertainty as to whether or not her son Titi has witnessed the conception, but is simply refusing 'pour sa sauvegarde, obstinément, de comprendre ce qu'il savait' (*RC*, 193). And so the cycles of real or imagined sexual abuse, terrified silence and alarming amnesia continue to seep into the next generation. Titi (himself conceived under the gaze of a porn camera), may or may not have witnessed his mother having sex with (or being raped by) a man (or several men). Titi's mother Rosie resents (or hates) her son for maybe knowing what did or did not happen, but is unable, in any event, to talk to him about this thing that he may or may not know, or may once have known, but has now, perhaps, 'un-known'. The swirls of amnesia that afflict the characters and relationships of *Rosie Carpe* are not the mere indices of a 'postmodern' sensibility, but revolve around evocations of unknowable – perhaps sexualized, perhaps not – mental and emotional damage.

Rosie's repression of almost every feeling of pain will come to embed itself at the heart of her relationship with Titi, a relationship that seems to accrue more and more potential for horror the blander and less specific the prose describing Rosie's consciousness becomes. A good example of how the narrator falls worryingly silent at precisely the moment when the reader (and Rosie) need most to know exactly what is going on is during the period of Titi's infancy in Antony, when Rosie's milk mysteriously dries up; Titi refuses to drink from the bottle, and as a result nearly dies of starvation. While the sequence's events begin clearly enough – 'Dans la nuit, Rosie constata que son lait s'était tari brutalement' (*RC*, 125) – things become progressively foggy in the pages that follow, as the state of mind of the isolated and impoverished Rosie begins to get blander and blander. A radical psychic split is taking place: 'Mais pourquoi, songea-t-elle, portait-il le pyjama jaune qu'elle

ne lui mettait plus depuis quelque temps déjà ? Si c'était le cas, alors, se dit-elle, elle ne l'avait pas vu réellement' (RC, 129). And then a part of the screen, as it were, fades to white. The narrator's sentences become suddenly shorter and more robotic; Rosie's movements around the tiny basement flat become more and more machine-like, her thoughts more and more delusional: "Mon lait va revenir," songeait-elle' (RC, 130). By the time the reader begins to dread the possibility of the child's death, it is far from clear what exactly is going on in Rosie's brain. All we are told is that 'elle sut autre chose encore, mais de manière si trouble et si moite qu'elle pouvait oublier aussitôt qu'elle le savait. Elle avait Titi dans les bras' (RC, 131).¹⁷

Titi's first near-death comes, then, via a series of psychic and textual absences at crucial moments. Titi will come close to eradication two more times in the course of the novel and, each time, the ambiguous act of neglect or assault will be rendered mysterious by the narrator's tendency to 'blank out' in weird complicity with the abusive parental environment. NDiaye creates a textual world of deadening and deadened accomplices in the harming of children: the narrator colludes with Rosie (and the absent father Max) by herself remaining absent when we most need her information; Rosie colludes with the neighbour who dislocates Titi's arm (as well as leaving him in his own excrement) by forgetting the neighbour's face and name (despite the fact that he has also impregnated her); even Titi colludes with his own appalling parenting, as most children in his situation do,¹⁸ by reducing his demands to a minimum via the development of 'son tact inconscient d'enfant solitaire' (RC, 171). NDiaye's world is one in which physical and psychic damage goes unacknowledged and unhealed because it finds a home within blankness.¹⁹ Victims have no access to knowledge about their potential suffering because the suffering is covered up by both the assailant and the victim; the ignorance is transmitted from generation to generation; and emotionally 'dead' and/or abusive parents facilitate the growth of similar kinds of 'deadness' in their offspring.

By the time we meet the grown-up Titi of Part Four, he is functioning and successful in his career (he is a maths teacher), but, beneath a veneer of cheerful normality, completely and utterly mad.²⁰ The battle that takes place between Titi and Lagrand for possession of Rosie's body and absent soul is grotesque, and underlines the persistent attachment of these two damaged adult sons to the grey and deathless figure of the 'dead' mother. It is Lagrand who will win this strangely zombified oedipal struggle, stealing a miraculously – but all too briefly –

reanimated Rosie from Titi's house of wax with an evident satisfaction. Lagrand's victory over living death is always only provisional, of course. Even if he fights courageously against the encroaching blankness of the Carpes, it is always only a matter of time before they 'get' him, and it is with a sigh of despair that the reader finds him chatting on the final pages with his ghastly mother-in-law Diane about the headless Francis Carpe. It is difficult not to see in the figure of Lagrand an avatar of Ben, the handsome (and black) hero of George A. Romero's classic 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. Like Ben, Lagrand appears for much of the time to be the only character with the capacity to stay psychically alive. Surrounded by supernatural zombies and passive, catatonic or reactionary humans for whom full-blown zombification is clearly just around the corner, both Ben and Lagrand strike out energetically at these walking corpses, desperate to prove that *they* are different because *they* are truly alive.²¹ Finding an alarmingly deadened Lisbeth keeping watch over the dying Titi while everyone else is at the *Astérix* film, Lagrand is forced to take in a seemingly fantastical truth:

Son visage n'exprima plus rien, pareil, pensa Lagrand, au visage qu'elle aurait dans la tombe, pareil au tombeau lui-même. Ah, se dit Lagrand, consterné, si Lisbeth n'est pas une simple d'esprit, si elle n'est pas une pauvre idiote donnée à Francis Carpe en échange de je ne sais quoi, que peut-elle bien être? [...] Il lui semblait que le visage s'éloignait de lui sans bouger, qu'il se fondait dans l'incertitude d'une idée ou d'un rêve incompréhensible, aussi abstrait, mystérieux, qu'un végétal, qu'une plante commune et cependant tout d'un coup inouïe. Les yeux de Lisbeth étaient posés sur lui mais il voyait bien qu'elle n'était plus là, même s'il entendait le frémissement de son souffle, sa respiration de feuilles. (RC, 280-1)

Lisbeth is perhaps literally a zombie, then, her conversion hastened, it might be argued, by the plantation-haunted Caribbean setting in which she finds herself.²² 'Lève-toi!', shrieks Lagrand at this thing he finds sitting in the grass (RC, 277), horrified by its spectrality: whatever it is, he recognizes that it is blank in a way that is no longer meaningfully human. In the same way, it is only Lagrand who is filled with a 'malaise indéfinissable' (RC, 255) at the sight of a hummingbird who inexplicably gives up the ghost while perched on the end of Diane Carpe's foot, Diane Carpe, whose 'yeux [...] presque blancs' (RC, 227) are akin to those of a veritable super-ghoul, one, perhaps, with powers over life and death itself.

Lagrand's life is filled with moments of anti-zombie resistance, even if

they are sometimes subject to violent overruling. Even if he experiences terrible lapses of agency, allowing himself to be treated like a bewitched zombie-slave by the Carpes, being ear-raped by the disgusting old woman on the beach, or, in the narrative's final pages, having his ear chewed off by Diane Carpe, he remains, in this novel, the reader's only hope for a vision of potential aliveness. His own moments of madness are, on the whole, wonderfully productive, revealing an almost shamanic capacity for the sharing of another's subjective experience. When Lazare relates his and Abel's murder of the old couple, Lagrand finds the very borders of his own identity dissolving: he *becomes* the terrified Lazare, he becomes Abel too, taking on – Christ-like – their guilt for a crime they have already committed. In a world of characters that cannot or will not feel the affective reality of others, Lagrand is all empathic emotion: it literally pours out of him, in the form of the urine he leaks after rescuing Titi from his dangerously 'dead' mother and, in the process, rediscovering his own. From very early on in his relationship with Rosie, he talks to the troubled woman in the manner of some kind of cosmic counsellor, an impossibly reassuring mixture of father, angel and friend: 'Très bien, Rosie, dit Lagrand. Si vous pensez que c'est arrivé d'une certaine façon et pas d'une autre, c'est vous qui avez raison à ce propos, et vous seule. Moi j'entends ce que vous dites et je le prends comme vous me le dites' (RC, 22). Faithful to Wilfred Bion's (1962) prescription of the good enough caregiver or therapist, Lagrand will also respond appropriately to Titi's non-verbally expressed fear of dying, understanding it through magical hallucination (RC, 308), and, at the moment that truly matters, able – in stark contrast to a character like Lucie in *La Sorcière* – to treat the vulnerable child as if it were his own: 'Je suis le père et le seul père' (RC, 311), he announces. Lagrand's is a fantastical sensitivity, and yet, outlandish though it may seem – he is afraid, at one point, of touching his aching head, for fear of the open lips of a wound he'll find there – it is, handled by NDiaye, stark and convincing. For *Rosie Carpe* is NDiaye's postmodern New Testament, and if figures like Rosie, Lazare and the Carpes evoke playful and perverse new versions of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, John the Baptist and Satan; Lagrand, the only character in the novel to feel life in his veins and the sun on his skin – 'Je ne suis pourtant pas cette vache crevée' (RC, 234) – is Christ and Christ alone.

It is in his radical propensity for aliveness that Lagrand begins to show a way out of the overwhelming blankness that has clogged the air of NDiaye's novels up until his appearance. His is a messianic presence,

then, but one that is complex, riddled with ambivalence, humanity and terror at what he expects ethically of himself. If he is able to behave with decency towards others, it is because he has proven himself capable of looking at those aspects of himself – notably his relationship with his mother – that had previously been too painful to contemplate. Lagrand, more than any of NDiaye’s protagonists, proves himself equal to Freud’s injunction (1914) not only to repeat but, crucially, to remember and to ‘work through’. Even though he is manifestly *not* Rosie’s fantastically darkened brother, ‘ce Noir qui n’est pas mon frère’ (RC, 30), as the bizarre identity confusions of the opening pages make clear, Lagrand behaves towards Rosie and her little boy Titi with the warmth of ‘real’ family, a warmth that will never be forthcoming from the boy’s actual father Max, nor from Rosie’s biological brother Lazare, and certainly not from the monstrous M. and Mme Carpe. As Rosie observes, ‘[il] se comporte avec moi comme avec un autre lui-même’ (RC, 30). Lagrand reinvents both family and community in the manner of a Caribbean Jesus, offering the pitiful Rosie something like genuine love and kinship, a gift she, for the most part, declines, but which trickles through the white coldness and cruelty of this novel’s perverse world with a gently comforting glow. Unlike Fanny’s fellow-metic and would-be-saviour young Georges in *En famille*, Lagrand settles strongly into this text, making it his own, usefully hijacking the narrative point of view halfway through, and asserting himself as the ethical centre of this barren world. Against the odds, he makes himself Rosie’s family, forces her to have him, to act in her own best interests, even if she is too bent on self-annihilation to want it of her own accord.²³ That the novel’s final pages find him more strangely passive and zombified – under the eerie influence of his new mother-in-law, Diane Carpe – than we have ever seen him, says more about NDiaye’s aesthetic need (at least, at this point in her career) for a nihilistic crushing of hope than about the beauty that has gradually been revealed about Lagrand’s capacity for a self beyond blankness.

Marks of Weakness, Marks of Woe: *Mon cœur à l’étroit* (2007)

Nadia, the narrator of *Mon cœur à l’étroit*, will, like Lucie and Rosie before her, bring up a child who grows up to despise her. The pleasure Ralph takes in his adult male ability to punish, castigate and otherwise humiliate his increasingly desperate mother is contextualized

by a narrative in which Nadia's manipulative parenting emerges as the emotional cornerstone of yet another 'dead' mother-child dyad. This novel is different, though: it is the first novel by NDiaye in which blank psychotic breakdown is not presented as the only conceivable outcome for both text and protagonist. Nadia manages a miraculous psychic and existential achievement, one that sounds normal enough in its banal formulation, but which Wilfred Bion (1962) rightly considered so precious and worthy of analysis that he named one of his books after it: she learns from experience. The sparkling new phenomenon of fresh insight seems to bend the narrative to its healed will, and the novel is able to conclude in a way which, if not exactly happy, nevertheless smacks of something incredibly peaceful: the subject's acceptance of the way things are and have been. Nadia's 'hemmed-in heart' beats more and more loudly the more determinedly she walls up her shame, and, like the guilty narrator of Poe's 'Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), is eventually forced to spill its ugly secrets, or at least abject traces of them, in the distinctly 'un-blank' form of the 'chose noire' (*MCE*, 296) she gives birth to in the novel's post-catastrophic final chapter. Nadia's trajectory from comfort and delusion to cosmic affliction and, eventually, some kind of enlightenment is almost biblical in tone, at times resembling a modern, secular version of the Book of Job. In the analysis that follows I shall sketch out the key stages of Nadia's terrible punishment, and the simultaneously fantastical, political and psychotherapeutic form assumed by the work of her redemption.

When her tale begins, Nadia dwells in a literally fog-filled world that is entirely subjugated to the force of her will to not know what is happening to her and her husband Ange. Having been marked out suddenly and inexplicably for stigmatizing persecution by the community into which they have apparently assimilated, the couple persists in its deranged insistence that everything is normal. Even if it clearly is not – the daily insults and physical assaults are, after all, difficult to ignore entirely – neither the new situation, whatever it is, nor the possible reasons for it can be acknowledged or put into language: 'Je ne peux pas le nommer', says Nadia to her step-daughter Gladys. 'Je ne sais pas comment appeler ni décrire cela. Quand bien même je le pourrais [...] que je ne le dirais pas car ce serait céder de manière ignoble' (*MCE*, 49). While every vestige of their home, marriage, livelihood and profession comes under attack, while passers-by stare at them with incredulity and revulsion as though they carry the mark of the Beast (*MCE*, 23; 28), Nadia and Ange keep their eyes firmly to the ground: 'Aussi nous

ne parlons pas, progressant tête baissée, les yeux au sol afin de ne rien pouvoir remarquer autour de nous qui nous froisserait ou nous gênerait, toute espèce de vexation à laquelle on sait qu'on n'opposera qu'un douloureux silence' (MCE, 12). Unable to look strangers in the eye ('J'esquisse [...] un vague sourire, évitant seulement de le regarder dans les yeux', MCE, 13), Nadia is determined to block out the visual indices of chagrin as well as the aural ones, plugging up her earholes both physically ('Je porte aussitôt les mains à mes oreilles', MCE, 32) and psychosomatically ('C'est comme si, d'un coup, je me trouvais atteinte de surdité', MCE, 52). It is when Ange is mysteriously wounded that Nadia's capacity for a positively demented disavowal of reality is really given the chance to shine: 'J'enlève mes lunettes. Je couvre mes yeux de mes mains et reste ainsi quelques minutes dans l'attitude de la réflexion mais en réalité incapable de faire se succéder logiquement et utilement mes pensées [...] Je me sens distraite, de façon déplacée, en même temps que profondément anéantie' (MCE, 38). As for the vacancy with which she at first fails to see the pieces of Ange's flesh that are later placed in her coat (MCE, 75), subsequently wrapping the 'viande' in tissue paper as though it were that night's dinner (MCE, 77), it is the cornerstone of a quintessentially NDiayean comedy of the grotesque, practised with more grim hilarity perhaps only in *En famille*, when Fanny's mother continues to serve drinks while her daughter is being torn to pieces by the dogs.

In *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, NDiaye could not be clearer about the fact that both Nadia's sudden stigmata and her pathological need to disavow them take place within a socio-political context in which persecution and its denial are related to both 'race' and racializing conditions. Nadia's presumably North African background, which she has done everything in her power to render invisible – the novel is, at bottom, a contemporary 'passing' narrative²⁴ – becomes gradually more explicit as the novel progresses, but from the very start the reader is immersed in racialized landscapes. The city of Bordeaux, in which the novel's first half unfolds, is linked historically to the transatlantic slave trade, a phenomenon which may never be overtly remarked upon, but which hovers over the lives of its inhabitants like a phantom. This is a city in which the trams refuse to allow Nadia to board (MCE, 191–5), in which she is spat at by strangers in the street ('juste les cheveux un peu mouillés, ce n'est rien, MCE, 14), and in which she is uncomfortably aware of a shameful kinship between herself and the hordes of wretches, her '*frères de chagrin*' (MCE, 116) who fill the waiting rooms of the local commis-

sariat to have their identity card renewed. The train to Toulon – a city inextricably associated with contemporary far right politics in France – will not move until Nadia descends from it. The similarity between Nadia and Bordeaux's second-class citizens is specified as grounded in the body, exactly as Fanny's alleged resemblance to young Georges and to her over-friendly colleagues in the fast-food restaurant was in *En famille*: 'Il me semble remarquer [...] quelques figures et silhouettes du même genre que la mienne [...] Cette fraternité navrée me froisse, me fait honte' (MCE, 193–5). Just as the novel is a trajectory of growing insight vis-à-vis Nadia's years of mistreating those closest to her (her first husband, her son, her granddaughter, her neighbour and – for the first time in all NDiaye's work, and not altogether convincing, since it is so poorly developed – her parents), it is equally one of nascent politicized self-awareness as a negatively racialized subject within a white-dominated society.

Halfway through the novel, Nadia actually begins to *see* the painful distinctions between different 'types' of people that she (like NDiaye herself, apparently) hitherto experienced as invisible:

De même que je sais distinguer sans devoir y réfléchir entre deux odeurs familières ou deux goûts habituels, je peux séparer immédiatement les êtres auxquels je ressemble de ceux dont je croyais faire partie ... (MCE, 194)

Pour la première fois depuis longtemps, je me sens violemment humiliée. (MCE, 193)

Nadia's unnamed stigmata are certainly racialized via a number of clear indices, but 'race' is not the only matrix through which her difference demands to be read. Providing a simultaneously more and less readable framework through which to interpret Nadia's marginalization than she did for Fanny in *En famille*, NDiaye creates a social situation for her narrator in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* which infects the woman in all manner of ways. Nadia – and, by association, Ange – are inhabited by a veritable plague of viruses. As Nadia herself puts it, 'Je suis marquée [...] des stigmates évidents d'une ignominie quand bien même elle n'a pas de nom' (MCE, 265). The way in which the community turns so suddenly against them, violently hostile, is strongly redolent of witch-hysteria ('les mères de famille pressent contre leur ventre leur enfant rougissant quand j'arrive', MCE, 10), with Nadia and Ange caught in the role of the town paedophiles or perverts. They are hounded out of the school where they have for so long taught in blissful, respectable

peace as if they were secret monsters who have been brusquely 'outed', finally recognizable to decent folk, and even to children, as sick and twisted degenerates.

The theme of sexualized marginality is more present in this novel than in any other as gay and bisexual male characters suddenly attain a visibility (in the form of Nadia's son Ralph and his ex-boyfriend Inspector Lanton) which they hitherto had not been granted in NDiaye's work, outside the dandified figure of Eugène in *En famille* and the vaguely homo-erotic pairings of Gilbert and Lemaître in *Un temps de saison* and Lazare and Abel in *Rosie Carpe*. Here, male bisexuality (in every sense) appears as an omnipresent force. The neighbour Richard Noget is described as an utterly queer creature, both masculine and feminine, 'à la fois maigre et mou, bizarrement gras par endroits et sec à d'autres, son corps oisif qui semble l'incarnation de sa duplicité obséquieuse et, presque, de son ambivalence sexuelle (car il a malgré sa barbe des airs de femme étrange)' (*MCE*, 42). As for Ange, he bears the name of a creature without sex while at the same time growing a wound on which Nadia's narration confers the status of magical, stigmatized vagina, a Cronenbergian new organ which constantly leaks fluids, confers non-negotiable social inferiority on a previously powerful, conservative man, and which Nadia both longs to look at and cannot bear to see. Nadia herself is constantly involved in 'queer' desires and acts, which call to mind the understated female bisexuality of earlier texts and characters (e.g. Valérie and the Woman; Fanny and Lucette; Lucie and Isabelle) while at the same time far outstripping them in explicitness. Longing to seduce her son's ex-lover Lanton, she is, to her outrage, accused by the same son of desiring his new partner Wilma, a gynaecologist who will, within minutes of meeting Nadia, indeed penetrate her with a speculum (*MCE*, 246–8). This is a novel in which sexualized normativity is as openly contested as its racialized counterpart, and Nadia's and Ange's sudden pathologization by their community must accordingly be read within a context of both sexualized and racialized stigmatizing frameworks. Over all these modes of potential stigma hovers the spectre of organized extermination. The pharmacist warns Nadia (*MCE*, 22) of the danger of taking Ange to hospital, where he would most likely be incinerated. The couple's snobbish refusal to acquire or watch a television is, it is hinted, perhaps at the root of their ignorance of a national situation of grave consequence for them and their ilk (*MCE*, 187). When Nadia does eventually flee Bordeaux (the city, we should remember, where

French fascist Maurice Papon was chief of police), her departure, while ostensibly undertaken in order to visit Ralph, assumes the hue of a flight from holocaust: she promises to send for Ange as if she were leaving him in a place of mortal danger (*MCE*, 188). But the spectre of potential extermination dogs her at every step. For what are Ralph and Wilma, if not a pair of Sadeian ogres, presiding over a castle of meat and death ('en retrait mais assez proche pour que les habitants de ces pauvres maison n'ignorent rien de ce qu'il s'y passe', *MCE*, 238), in whose garden lies a mausoleum of human bones?

The only way to transcend the seemingly ineluctable outcome of internal and external annihilation, the novel implies, is through the acquisition of emotional self-knowledge. Psychic transformation is never so clearly spelled out in all NDiaye's texts as the *sine qua non* of socio-political change. The path towards Nadia's potential true self assumes the unprepossessing form of the abject neighbour Noget. Fulfilling both a therapeutic and a neo-parental function, Noget also carries overtones of the shaman and of the powerful god in disguise. Unable, in the early chapters, even to pronounce Noget's name, so thoroughly does he and his association with potential stigma and shameful marginality disgust her, Nadia comes to depend on her neighbour in a fundamentally regressed manner. Noget never ceases to be a troubling, even sinister figure, as far as Nadia's portrait of him goes. But what her narration is nevertheless forced to accept is the truth of Noget's insistence that it is her inability to confront her foreclosed layers of knowledge (of familial trauma, of her acts of abuse and of her racialized stigma) that will perpetuate her misery. 'Vous ne voulez pas comprendre d'où vient le mal', he tells her (*MCE*, 79), warning both her and her husband Ange of the folly of denying their shared injury. This injury, which takes physical shape in the form of Ange's endlessly seeping wound, must, on the contrary, remain horrendously visible, resistant to rationalization, erasure or disavowal, until such time as it disappears of its own accord: 'Il ne faut pas le soigner, dit-il avec agitation. Il ne doit rien oublier de qu'on lui a fait!' (*MCE*, 84) Nadia is revolted by the 'intimité détestable' (*MCE*, 63) that Noget seems intent on creating with her, by his horrible determination to keep her pain in the open. But it soon becomes clear that it is intimacy *per se* – intimacy with anyone – that she finds truly frightening.

As Noget gets closer and closer, entering Nadia's home, feeding her and Ange with his impossibly delicious meals, his function starts to become explicitly maternal. Contemptuous, at first, of Noget's determi-

nation to 'jouer à la petite maman' (*MCE*, 67), Nadia is soon dependent on the nourishment he brings, registering, with shame, that his mere presence causes her to salivate. 'Il ne nourrit que pour mieux nous soumettre' (*MCE*, 132), she tells herself angrily, in the manner of an adult baby, furious at her undeniable physical dependency on her mother's milk. But the relationship that springs up between Nadia and Noget, not unlike a psychotherapeutic one, is predicated on his refusal either to stop nourishing her or to collude with her in her denial of her buried feelings. Each activity reinforces the other, combining in the practice of what Wilfred Bion named alpha function, the quasi-magical process through which caregiver or therapist 'contains' the baby's or patient's anxiety. She does this via her unmitigated readiness to take in the weaker partner's unprocessed and intolerable fears and feelings, and to return them, in manageable form, to that partner, who can now use them in her own process of psychic growth, her journey towards a radical openness to her emotional truth:

The infant projects a part of its psyche, namely its bad feelings, into a good breast. Thence in due course they are removed and re-introjected. During their sojourn in the good breast they are felt to have been modified in such a way that the object that is re-introjected has become tolerable to the infant psyche. (Bion, 1962: 90)

Both the pus generated by Ange's wound and the living creature swelling up in Nadia's belly appear to be the by-products of Noget's alpha function. Noget's acts of feeding cause his reluctant patients Nadia and Ange to change in ways they neither desire nor understand. While Ange gets thinner and thinner, stops both urinating and defecating, and appears to shrink and liquidize in his sick bed, Nadia becomes fatter and fatter, her desire to excrete and egest soon uncontrollable. 'Je suis gorgée de mangeaille, sur le point d'éclater de toutes parts' (*MCE*, 257), she remarks with horror, and yet it is this disgusting corporeal metamorphosis that emerges as the corollary of her eventual acquisition of internal clear-sightedness. When the black creature Nadia has been growing – and which Noget explicitly owns as his baby – eventually bursts out and escapes, the 'birthing' takes place against the strains of a song sung by her mother, containing the line 'la misère est sortie de moi'. Noget's combination of ruthless honesty and nourishment would appear, fantastically, to have converted Nadia's and Ange's previously unshakable commitment to self-deception into something physically repellent, which, having exited the body in physical form, leaves both

of them psychically reborn. Ange's youthful reappearance in the novel's final pages (in a chapter significantly entitled 'Tous guéris') confirms his passage towards a new form of lucid selfhood, while Nadia's quiet acceptance of her triple incarnation as grandmother, mother and daughter offers her the chance of a family life which the likes of poor Fanny would have killed to obtain.

The novel's sudden 'happy ending' feels, in a way, somehow too good to be true.²⁵ Where have these lovely old working-class parents of Nadia's suddenly appeared from? Would she really have abandoned such warm-hearted caregivers, no matter how snobbish and self-hating she was? And how exactly did Ralph find them? These questions fade away on the sunshine of the beach along which Nadia pushes her suddenly acceptable baby granddaughter Souhar. It is as if NDiaye has grown too old for the sadness and isolation to which she condemned the likes of Fanny, Lucie, Herman and Rosie. This novel's loose ends are left to their own devices, proliferating in the text's darker recesses. We will never find out if the emotionally under-nourished Ralph's insatiable adult appetite for (human?) meat may move into abeyance, now that his abusive mother Nadia has come to join him on his distant island and, furthermore, appears to have turned into a better person. If Nadia's initially helpless attitude at her adult son's house had seemed to indicate that he, once again, would be expected to do the parenting of his own mother, it may be that his vengeful dishes of blood and bones signalled a refusal on his part to perpetuate the cycle of perverted nourishment. By the end of this deeply strange, perhaps warm-hearted novel, Nadia is at last eating the food prepared for her by her magical mother. We can only hope that Ralph too – not to mention little Souhar – will be permitted, at some stage, to eat in the manner they deserve.

Blank Power! *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009)

Trois femmes puissantes is far and away NDiaye's most successful book in terms of commercial triumph and public accolade. A triptych of stories, loosely and often unconvincingly stitched together via the heavily marketed themes of 'women', 'strength' and 'Africa', the book can be compared from a structural and iconographic perspective both to Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877) and – even more interestingly, since the work is so little known – Marie Vieux-Chauver's 1968 Haitian masterpiece, *Amour, colère et folie*.²⁶ Translated into English (unlike

the vast majority of NDiaye's work) by John Fletcher in 2012 as *Three Strong Women*, it received favourable reviews in the Anglophone world, the *New York Times* calling it 'the poised creation of a novelist unafraid to explore the extremes of human suffering' (Eberstadt, 2012), the British newspaper the *Guardian* meanwhile enthusing about 'three heroines [who] have an unassailable sense of their own self-worth, while their psychological battles have an almost mythic resonance' (Jaggi, 2012). It is clearly thanks to the worldwide success of *Trois femmes puissantes* in French and English that NDiaye was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013 – and yet one cannot help but feel frustrated at the irony that incomparably better-conceived work published by NDiaye between 1985 and 2007 remains obscure in comparison. As for the svelte return to artistic form that is *Ladivine*, her magnificent novel of 2013, its assured and baroque brilliance does make the fêted triptych predecessor look somewhat raggedy in comparison.

Trois femmes puissantes undoubtedly has its merits: scholarly articles by Christophe Ippolito (2013), Shirley Jordan (2013) and Anne Martine Parent (2013) tease out fascinating aspects of the text, including its ambitious use of symbolism (Ippolito), its reinvention of concepts of power (Jordan) and its corporeal evocation of uncontainable affect (Parent). The book taken as a whole is, however, relatively unconvincing, at least when considered in the context of NDiaye's breathtaking, if less commercially successful, earlier and subsequent work. It is worth noting that as many scholarly articles have been devoted to the analysis of paratextual phenomena surrounding *Trois femmes puissantes* as have been written about the text as an aesthetic object deserving of careful study. Dominic Thomas (2010), for example, investigates the strange furore that exploded around NDiaye in November 2009 immediately after her Goncourt victory. Meanwhile, Clarissa Behar (2013), Sarah Burnautzki (2013) and Lydie Moudileno (2013) argue, in a set of brilliantly complementary and politically lucid articles, that the novel represents a turning point in NDiaye's self-representational strategy, transforming her from an artist generally characterized by relative invisibility, 'ordinariness' and republican-style Frenchness into a brown-skinned poster girl for difference and diversity.²⁷ In the rapidly growing academic context of NDiaye studies, *Trois femmes puissantes* may well end up being considered as more noteworthy, then, for what it reveals about French society and its racializing spectacle a decade into the new millennium than as a novel of true literary importance.

Everything about the marketing of *Trois femmes puissantes* combined

to make three quite separate novellas into one worthy pronouncement about 'African women', their long suffering and their indisputable *puissance*. The title itself is the first element in the process of the triple-text's conversion into a single, artificially coherent, readable and uplifting unit, its putative positivity reassuringly bound and sealed in by 'proud' femininity. Apparently non-ironic, this title establishes women and their alleged strength as the central theme of the book, despite the fact that the three very different stories could be taken to be 'about' all manner of very different issues. Norah's tale of reunion with her perverse father addresses so many different phenomena – abandonment, isolation, psychosis – that it seems arbitrary, to say the least, to insist that *la puissance féminine* is the overarching concern. Even more bizarre is the co-opting of the central tale, that of the Aquitaine-dwelling literature teacher Rudy Descas, into the apparently straight-faced 'strong women' project. This section of the book is by far the longest – 150 pages of a 300-page book – and the narrative focuses on and is narrated from the perspective of a depressed and paranoid (white) man. Even if we read obliquely – sensitive to the largely absent spectre of Rudy's long-suffering Senegalese wife Fanta – to repackage the tale as one that somehow focuses on Fanta's alleged strength of character rather than Rudy's own emotional (and specifically paternal) transformation smacks of nothing so much as wilful invention. And yet this is precisely what the book's blurb invites us to do:

Trois récits, trois femmes qui disent non. Elles s'appellent Norah, Fanta, Khady Demba. Chacune se bat pour préserver sa dignité contre les humiliations que la vie lui inflige avec une obstination méthodique et incompréhensible.

It is hard not to wonder if the publisher has made some kind of mistake, managing somehow to print the blurb for a different book altogether on the back of NDiaye's volume. Such a flagrant disregard for reality suggests an instance of seriously absent-minded blankness. And yet the same mantra is repeated everywhere, drone-like, from newspaper articles to magazine spreads, from interviews with literary critics to interviews with NDiaye herself: *Trois femmes puissantes*, we are told, is a unified, coherent novel, and its indisputable and reassuring 'theme' is the strength and indefatigability of African women.²⁸

The figure most frequently deployed to justify such a skewed presentation of the fragmented, multi-dimensional text is the heroine of the third story, the young widow and would-be-migrant, Khady Demba.

Khady is made to serve as the connector between the three otherwise disparate stories within the book itself. We see her first, briefly, as a maid and babysitter in the house of Norah's father. We later learn that she is a distant cousin of Fanta, Rudy's long-suffering wife, before diving fully into her story, a final tale which sees her exploited, injured, raped and finally killed in the attempt to escape African poverty and reach fortress Europe. Khady's deployment as narrative connector is unconvincing to say the least. And NDiaye's descriptive, prescriptive prose – itself blank and, for perhaps the only time, somehow leaden – also encourages the simplification of Khady Demba. Khady seems to represent the saintly final stage in a developing series of working-class, ethnic minority secondary characters who, unlike NDiaye's typically neurotic (or indeed psychotic) protagonists, are impervious to identity-confusion or shame. These dignified *mètèques* are dotted all over the various texts. Track-suited young Georges in *En famille*, prefers to lose his one true love, Fanny, than to submit to the indignities of the grandmother's racist village. Corinna Daoui in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* would rather scrape a living as a sex worker than aspire to the bourgeois pretensions of white Bordeaux. They will pop up in the plays and short stories too, in the form of Hilda's sister Corinne, or the petulant (though white) maid Séverine (another track-suited character, however) in 'Tous mes amis' (2004).

The problem with Khady Demba, though, is that her noble 'puissance' is so blandly and skimpily drawn, so unconvincing when compared to the spine-chilling skill with which NDiaye evokes the Christ-like struggle taking place within the soul of Lagrand, say, or even the different, swirling levels of bovine spectrality in the character of Rosie Carpe. One thinks back to the infinitesimal mood-shifts and paradoxes described in such microscopic detail by the seventeen-year-old NDiaye as rolling around the heavy heart and fevered mind of young Z in *Quant au riche avenir* (1985), and one cannot help but wonder: what is going on here? Why, when it comes to Khady, is NDiayan nuance in such short supply? The narrator seems to expect us simply to accept a series of rather twee statements about how Khady experiences herself as a human being, as fully alive, as an indisputable 'true self':

Son propre visage passa dans le faisceau de lumière brutale et elle songea: Oui, moi, Khady Demba, toujours heureuse de prononcer muettement son nom et de le sentir si bien accordé avec l'image qu'elle avait, précise et satisfaisante, de sa propre figure ainsi qu'avec son cœur de Khady, ce qui se nichait en elle et auquel nul n'avait accès en dehors d'elle-même. (TFP, 280)

Whilst there is some attempt to ground this remarkably strong sense of self within a wider context of healthy psychological development and relationality – Khady, we are told, enjoyed true emotional connection with her kindly grandmother and with her late husband, and communes ecstatically with the physical world – so much of what the narrator tells us about the functioning of the character’s heart and head reads like a recipe for ‘mindfulness’ and ‘healthy self-esteem’ written on a series of post-it notes rather than a convincing literary portrait of a complex being.

It may be argued, of course, that Khady Demba, like Félicité in Flaubert’s ‘Un cœur simple’, for example, simply is *not* a complex being, this being the reason for the extremely simplistic nature of her portrayal. We may have to accept that we have drifted into the fairytale dimension of the optimistic children’s stories that I shall consider in the final chapter. This is where the marketing of the novel becomes problematic, however: for this third story of Khady Demba is represented time and again in the press articles and interviews not as an experiment in the depiction of ‘un cœur simple’ but instead as emblematic of some kind of politically significant African realism. Moreover, the extreme violence of the narrative, as well as NDiaye’s decision to set it within the context of migration and asylum-seeking, suggests that there *is* a truly adult dimension to the ideas the text is attempting to discuss. There is thus a disturbing contradiction between the child-like portrayal of Khady’s secure little soul and the putative gravity of the tortures she must undergo. The story’s final pages, in which Khady gradually relinquishes her grip on the physical world, while at the same time finding that she is as immune as ever to the sensation of humiliation or shame, feel simply disingenuous. There is something problematic, for me at least, about how much the figure of the dark-skinned Khady Demba is made to ‘carry’, in terms of physical destruction and accompanying ideological ‘optimism’: it is though she is nothing more than the result of a condescendingly Africanized – and strangely blank – projection.

More persuasive literary creations are Rudy Descas – the cuckolded white Frenchman of the book’s long, sometimes very powerful, second section and Norah – the French mixed-race daughter of the masterful first story – both of whom tend to be occluded from the vast majority of the market representation of the novel, failing, as they do, to fit in with the much-repeated yet essentially false ‘strong African women’ motif. Their stories are (like NDiaye’s follow-up novel of 2013, *Ladivine*)

compelling and unashamedly melodramatic murder mysteries and family tragedies, from which both emerge as flawed detective-heroes and metamorphosed saints. Norah and Rudy share the same depression mixed with a thin sliver of 'core aliveness', as well as a haunting, punitive superego, which constantly whispers and shouts at them about the things they have done but should not have, as well as the things they have not done that they should have, causing them to piss themselves (Norah) and scratch at their behinds (Rudy) in grotesque dances of self-disintegration. Unlike Khady Demba, Norah and Rudy present the reader with the more interesting challenge of trying to glimpse the *potential* for a 'true self' which always skips just out of reach of the hapless protagonist, never quite solid or secure enough for her or him to take refuge in. And, unlike Khady, who is miraculously able to remember everything that has happened to her over the course of her confusing and disempowered life ('elle l'avait en tête précisément et s'efforçait, calmement, froidement, de le comprendre', *TFP*, 297), Norah and Rudy are the victims of horrible blanks in their consciousness, maddening gaps of memory during which they may or may not have lived in Africa, may or may not have witnessed their wicked father in the act of killing. For both Norah and Rudy are the children of murderous fathers and blankly denying mothers and, like all the intriguing protagonists of NDiaye's second cycle of novels with the exception of Khady Demba, they are themselves the parents of children they somehow cannot love quite well enough.

The story of Norah, her psychically annihilated sister and brother, and their French mother and African father, is as powerful and frightening as anything NDiaye has ever written. In its 100 odd pages, this tale succeeds in capturing the strange 'emptying out' of affect between damaged parents and their damaged children with an eeriness unmatched even in texts as fine as *La Sorcière* and *Rosie Carpe*. The conversation that takes place in prison between Norah and her zombified brother Sony, as they try to remember what they were like before they both died inside, is unbearably moving. Sony's sudden spark of aliveness, as he recalls past moments of happiness and emotional interaction, operates like an electric shock on the reader: 'Il gloussa de bonheur, et Norah reconnut immédiatement, violemment, le petit garçon à la bouche grande ouverte qu'elle lançait sur son lit couvert d'une chenille bleue' (*TFP*, 83). One way of reading the story is as one of Norah's attempt to repair the ungrievable disjunction that springs up between her increasingly robotic mother and the family's youngest

child and only boy, Sony. Meeting several years after Sony has been snatched away to Africa by his diabolical father, the middle-aged white mother and her 'mixed-race' teenage son attempt to converse, all the while exuding a sad, stiff artificiality that is, in NDiaye's precise prose, weirdly exacerbated by their different hairstyles:

Sony était, comme toujours, superbement vêtu d'un costume de lin sombre, sa peau était fine et douce, ses cheveux taillés en afro courte. Leur mère avait sa nouvelle figure figée, sa bouche un peu tordue, son casque de cheveux laqués blond-blanc et Norah voyait qu'elle prenait garde, en interrogeant Sony sur son collègue et ses matières de prédilection, de ne pas faire de fautes de syntaxe ou de grammaire, car elle pensait Sony bien plus instruit qu'elle, et elle en était humiliée et malheureuse [...] Norah remarqua que son frère ne considérait jamais personne directement. Son regard affable, impersonnel, allait d'un visage à l'autre sans s'arrêter sur aucun et il fixait avec attention, lorsqu'on lui parlait, quelque point invisible de l'espace, sans pour autant cesser de sourire ni de donner à ses traits une expression d'intérêt formel pour tout ce qu'on pouvait lui dire [...] Le déjeuner fini, ils se séparèrent et bien qu'il restât quelques jours avant le départ, Sony et leur mère ne se revirent plus et leur mère n'évoqua plus jamais Sony. (*TFP*, 55–6)

Ghostly familial awkwardness hovers over the story from start to finish, as parents and children find themselves trapped together in situations that are at once overwhelmingly, embarrassingly intimate and yet desperately disconnected and lonely. Norah's father ('nimbé de brillance froide', *TFP*, 11) acts towards her from start to finish in a way that exemplifies cold, rejecting distance, and yet there is also something invasive and inappropriate in his sly observation of her micturition ('Tu t'en es pissé dessus, tout à l'heure', *TFP*, 87) which suggests a fundamentally abusive mode of bonding. The only way father and daughter seem able to dwell together is within the space of a shared secret that is at once shaming and unspeakable. This interaction reaches its weird climax in the space of the tree and the bizarre bird-metamorphoses which take place within it:

Il la voyait comme elle le voyait, lui, à croupetons dans ses vêtements clairs, la figure effacée par sa propre obscurité.

En elle luttait la satisfaction de l'avoir découvert et l'horreur de partager un secret avec cet homme. (*TFP*, 80)

There are, perhaps, echoes here of the classical story of Myrrha (who was transformed into a myrrh tree after having sex with her father),

but what strikes me most about the details of what transpires between Norah and her father during their perverse interactions is the sense of ‘disorganized’ child–parent attachment (cf. Main and Solomon, 1990). Utterly repulsed by her father, Norah is nevertheless compelled to seek out uncomfortable, improbable closeness to him, whilst at the same time determined to achieve some kind of impossible vengeance (‘elle lui ferait rendre gorge’, *TFP*, 85). Daughterly feelings are, in Norah’s world, an impossibly confused and disorientating affair, as is her very experience of her past (did she really live in Grand-Yoff? is that really her in the photograph?), her present (why is she allowing her daughter Lucie to remain in a potentially dangerous situation with Jakob and Grete? is her maternal love somehow draining away from her?) and her future (how will she ever return to France?). Norah’s experience of family life has been such, it seems, that the only conceivable representation she can have of it – and of herself – is an impossibly muddled one, characterized by the strange kinds of fugues and dissociations described by Laing and Esterson (1964) in their pioneering work on the potential role played by environment and family in the development of ‘schizophrenia’. In Norah’s own terms, her sister, her brother and herself have spent their lives fighting ‘un démon assis sur le ventre’ (*TFP*, 77), a demon that has fed on the trauma of the various forms of hate-free abandonment, neglect and abuse to which their father and mother have constantly, and with seeming nonchalance, subjected them.

Perhaps by now it should no longer surprise us: it is NDiaye’s depiction of the failure of living love to grow between parent and child that emerges as this book’s most powerful aspect. The stories of both Norah and Rudy manage to capture the development of a grotesque blankness between (white or black) parent and (brown) child that is devastating in its quiet sadness. The sense of unspeakable yet palpable awkwardness between Rudy and his little half-African son Djibril hovers over the central story as surely as the repressed xenophobic insult Rudy yells at his wife Fanta shortly before leaving the house for his day of torment. Rudy’s story is a weirdly undulating affair, leisurely yet at the same time anxious, seeming to mimic the rhythm of the car in which the protagonist angrily cruises around the town and countryside on this seemingly interminable day. If the spectre of Rudy’s deranged and disconnected mother (‘Maman était-elle vivante?’ he wonders at one point, *TFP*, 140) hovers over his existence, zombified, and yet, just like the ‘dead’ mothers of Green’s (1983) landmark essay, tantalizing, inaccessible, jealous-making (for, like Fanta, she has emotionally

betrayed him with his nemesis Manille), it is Rudy's inability to feel something resembling straightforward paternal affection for Djibril that becomes increasingly problematic. NDiaye creates the troubling impression that Rudy's racialized assault on the boy back in Senegal is a displaced attack on his own – brown-skinned – son, a child to whom he cannot feel close, whose physical difference from him combines with an already existing sense of splitting, to create an unmanageable outburst of ogre-like violence:

Sans savoir ni comprendre ce qu'il faisait, ce qu'il allait faire, il avait sauté à la gorge du garçon.

Quelle impression bouleversante que de sentir sous ses pouces le tube annelé, tiède, moite de la trachée – Rudy s'en souvenait mieux que de tout le reste, et il se souvenait de n'avoir pensé, en appuyant sur le cou du garçon, qu'à la chair tendre du petit Djibril, son fils qu'il baignait chaque soir.

Machinalement il retourna ses mains, les regarda. (TFP, 179)

Rudy's transformation, the sudden, miraculous growth of a new capacity to love and care for this dark, anxiety-provoking, quiet son of his, is the climax of this long central narrative of *Trois femmes puissantes*. Emotional metamorphosis is thus the story's *raison d'être* and the reader's reward for having been forced – like poor Rudy – to sit in Rudy's skin for such a long time without respite. The metamorphosis, when it comes, is presented as the miraculous – yet psychically plausible – effect of a confluence of insights, all involving Rudy's sudden ability to see his own mother with new eyes. Having brought Djibril to the boy's grandmother's house to spend the night, only to find her absorbed in the rapturous worship of a little blond neighbour (there are echoes here of Hitchcock's 1964 film *Marnie*), Rudy finally sees that his mixed-race son will never be adored by Rudy's own white racist mother in the way she is now adoring her tiny neighbour ('il n'y avait nul espoir qu'il correspondît jamais à l'idée que maman se faisait d'un messenger divin', TFP, 235). Perhaps even more crucially, he realizes that will she never awaken from the slumber of her emotional deadness to interact with him, Rudy, her own son, in the way he has always longed for. His insight is cataclysmic and it is irreversible:

Rudy se sentait envahi d'un dégoût plein de lassitude.

Elle est cinglée, et de la plus stupide manière, et je ne veux plus ni ne dois plus protéger cela. Mon pauvre petit Djibril! Ah, nous ne remettons plus les pieds ici. (TFP, 239)

This moment of vision synthesizes all the repressed elements of Rudy's simultaneously damaged 'child' and 'parent' self in a way that is truly fantastical, and yet which is at the same time profoundly psychodynamic in its construction. Rudy *feels* his own repressed envy, an envy which Freud would doubtless describe as 'oedipal', when he sees the care his mother is bestowing on the little blond boy, and yet it is an envy which can now be transfigured into concern for his own child: 'Il en fut jaloux, à la fois pour lui et Djibril' (*TFP*, 236). It is thus Rudy's recognition (manifested in physical sensations: acid tears, the desire to vomit) of previously blanked-out affect which prepares the way for his own rebirth as a father. Offering his child the milk his own mother refuses to give either of them (*TFP*, 238), he hallucinates his mother's ambivalent breasts ('un peu lourds dans l'échancrure profonde du polo', *TFP*, 239) in the manner of a vulnerable, hungry (Klein (1946) would say 'paranoid-schizoid') and yet ultimately clear-sighted (in Kleinian terms, 'depressive') baby: 'Ils lui parurent gonflés de lait ou de plaisir. Il détourna les yeux, recula doucement pour qu'elle ôtât sa main' (*TFP*, 240). His acceptance not only that his mother is incapable of the sort of nourishment he has always wanted from her, but furthermore that her racism is of a kind that will ultimately do damage to his child, pushes Rudy from the ghoulish maternal space (adorned, ironically, with angels) and onto a new path, at the end of which lies the possibility of love, meaningful buzzard-angels and a new kind of family: the Franco-Senegalese one he has helped to create with Fanta.

Complex emotional stories such as Rudy's and Norah's cannot adequately be summed up by marketing machines, television interviews, or in soundbites about 'strength' or *puissance*: this is psychic life – and relationality – beyond the deadness of the *idée reçue*. It is a pity that their fragile, nuanced strangeness was largely drowned out by the commercialized platitudes which accompanied the Khady-dominated entrance of *Trois femmes puissantes* into the world. As we shall see in the following chapter, the challenge for almost all of NDiaye's theatrical characters – and indeed for NDiaye's theatre itself – will be to effect cathartic returns of the blankly buried past with a revolutionary force capable of refusing the machinations of capitalism, spectacularization and exoticizing enslavement.

Ghouls, Ghosts and Bloodless Abuse: NDiaye's Undead Theatre

Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark [...] None of this takes place on the order of the event. None of this takes place.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*

NDiaye published her first play, *Hilda*, in 1999, fourteen years after the publication of her first novel (in 1985), and a decade before winning the Prix Goncourt for her tenth novel (in 2009). Her development as a playwright thus takes place alongside a steadily growing success as a novelist, seeming to nudge the novels into new and often more overtly politicized territory. The first major stage production in France of *Hilda* was in 2002 at the Théâtre de l'Atelier in Paris, where Frédéric Béliet-García staged the piece, and the well-known actress Zabou Breitman starred as Mme Lemarchand. The play went on to win the Grand Prix de la Critique. The following year, NDiaye's third published play, *Papa doit manger*, made history on all kinds of fronts by entering the repertory of the Comédie-Française. It was the first play by a living woman (and only the second play by any woman) to enter the 323-year-old company's repertory, and this was also the first time, allegedly, that a 'black' actor had been taken on as a member of the theatre's troupe.¹ Since *Papa doit manger* there have been productions of all six of NDiaye's plays, as well as *Toute Vérité*, the play she co-authored with her husband Jean-Yves Cendrey, all over Europe and the United States.² In 2012, following the success of her shocking play *Les Grandes Personnes* – a spectacle of depressive revenants, parental demons and child sex abusers

– NDiaye received the ultimate theatrical accolade, when she received the Académie Française’s Grand Prix du Théâtre.

Explaining how she first came to create plays, a decade and a half into her writing career, NDiaye frames the enterprise in terms of what she somewhat over-modestly makes sound like her own torpor:

il me semblait que j’écrivais un roman court dont je ne conservais que les dialogues, éliminant toute partie descriptive, par lassitude, à ce moment-là, d’une certaine pesanteur du roman pour celui qui l’écrit, d’une sorte d’engagement soucieux ou angoissant dont il est difficile de faire l’économie et que j’avais l’impression de pouvoir m’épargner, pour un temps, grâce à cette forme resserrée, à cette prose étranglée.³

But these plays are far from lazily abridged versions of the novels. And they represent something more significant too than mere stylistic purification. NDiaye’s theatre concentrates the novels’ preoccupation with disavowed, unknowable and unmourned forms of violence into shorter, sharper and potentially collective experiences of horror. It conveys a world that is – if such a thing is possible – more terrifying than that of the prose fiction, a world in which characters have been removed even from the safety of descriptive paragraphs (there are no stage directions) and drift instead in a state of absolute unmooring, at the mercy of naked dialogues as brutal as they are de-contextualized. All semblance of parenting and protection, even if this was only ever at the level of a narrator’s more or less responsible framing, has been abandoned. The theatrical figures stand truly alone, unsheltered, without a nest of any kind.

Dominique Rabaté proposes that the plays strip down all human interaction to the bare bones of specifically economic exchange, all action and dialogue revolving around questions of subtraction and recompense, bribery and blackmail:

Le théâtre [...] poursuit le travail des romans, en mettant encore plus à nu cette structure terrifiante de l’âge du capitalisme avancé où nous sommes parvenus en ce début du XXI^e siècle. Tout est devenu économique, tout se marchande et se régule comme de l’argent, s’échange et se troque, se dévalue ou s’estime, loin de toute sentimentalité. L’affectif est mis hors jeu, et cette éviction produit une inquiétante étrangeté de tous les rapports intersubjectifs. (Rabaté, 2008: 47)

Economic procedures certainly tend to dominate the plots of these plays. In *Hilda* (1999), a wealthy, liberal housewife buys not only her working-class housekeeper’s time but also her body, her sexuality, her soul itself.

In *Papa doit manger* (2003), a liberal, 'anti-racist', pot-smoking teacher of French literature withholds financial support from his hairdresser partner, a mother of two, unless she can demonstrate an adequate grasp of the latest grammatical and syntactical constructions he has taught her. In *Les Serpents* (2004), an old woman offers to tell her ex-daughter-in-law all about the abuse that the latter's young son has suffered at the hands of his father, as long as she is paid handsomely for her tales of whipping, torture and infanticide. Money and property are indeed deployed as crucial hooks in NDiaye's theatre. But, as in the novels, they are the vehicles par excellence through which traumatized characters play out overpowering psychological urges, originating in infancy, to dominate and be dominated. Money is used, above all, as a means of attempting to regulate intolerable feelings of emptiness and inexplicable rage, feelings which are subsequently (or simultaneously) displaced onto human sacrificial objects. These human victims, often children, are then gradually eroded by more powerful characters, in the wake of money's failure to satisfy, unto death and beyond.

For Christophe Meurée (2009), the NDiaye's theatrical protagonists are characterized above all by their difficulty in fixing an identity. Haunted by an unshakable sense of lack, NDiaye's stage characters develop into (in Meurée's terms) either 'concave' or 'convex' figures, the former category vampirically sucked at by the latter, who swell and balloon with the energy, physically observable on their bodies and faces, that they have managed to extract from their now inwardly collapsed prey. NDiaye's protagonists, suggests Meurée, are compelled to devour one another in one of two ways: either by taking the object of desire inside themselves and thus somehow feeding on its perceived sense of aliveness (incorporation), or else by transforming wholesale into the object, taking on its identity and imagined sense of self (identification). Alliances based on the conception of the other as a separate subject with whom one might interact and communicate on non-abusive terms, are not conceived of. Equally unfeasible is non-traumatic introjection, the subject's gradual taking in of aspects of the external world, including other people, as part of her own joyful process of psychic growth and emotional development. We are left, instead, with endless pairs of greedy ghouls and the ever-disintegrating wraiths on which they gobble. It is rarely acknowledged by any of the play's characters, of course, that it is a process of deathly, fruitless feeding that we are watching. Thus Mme Lemarchand metaphorically chews on her pseudo-slave Hilda with the unstated desire of somehow 'becoming' her in all her putative

proletarian authenticity, yet is made no more happy, solid or real by her actions. In *Les Serpents*, Mme Diss's ogre-like son psychically feeds on his allegedly joyful son Jacky in the act of whipping and eventually killing the boy, and is, for a limited time, made resplendent by his acts of abuse. In *Les Grandes Personnes* (2011), a schoolteacher rapes the children in his care in a vain attempt to rectify his own unhappy childhood, to remake his own inner victim in the form of something powerful and strong.

It is important to note the infantile dimension of all the adults' frenzied bouts of feeding. These ghouls are almost without exception depicted as the under-nourished survivors of persecuting or neglectful environments in which they have been either beaten (Mme Diss's son), raped (Djamila), treated as a monster (Providence) or treated as their own parents' caregiver (the Schoolteacher). Oppressive characters such as Mme Diss, Mme Lemarchand and Papa cry out for food and drink as if they have never been fed in their lives. They seem desperately to be trying to obtain something from their prey that they have been unable to obtain at an earlier time of their lives. Unsurprisingly, they create family homes that are characterized by obscene, often supernatural zones of danger, vulnerability and discomfort; themselves clearly haunted by unspeakable phantoms, they will in turn become the phantoms of their victims, entering them in a vicious circle of abuse and invasion. Most of NDiaye's plays, not unlike those of the English playwright Sarah Kane (1971–99), resemble spiralling, fantastical nightmares. Often removed from the bounds of logical time, they play out within the disquieting frameworks of extreme neurosis or psychotic breakdown.

Olivia J. Choplin (2009) points out that the theatre of psychic dysfunction can, of course, play a potentially therapeutic role. Referring to Breuer and Freud's early work with so-called hysterics, Choplin recalls how the analysts initially used the Aristotelian term 'catharsis' in describing the women's release of repressed affects under hypnosis. In both his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916) and his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud suggests that a spectator's unconscious identification with the tragic characters s/he beholds on stage can allow for hidden mechanisms within his or her own psyche to be revealed. Similarly, Mannoni (1985) points to the way in which theatre may show us the pathological roles we may have been unconsciously playing out in 'real' life. NDiaye's plays are rituals of frustratingly tantalizing representation, stirring up the spectator's babyish longing in their mimicry of failed parenting. The unbearable, traumatic absence

of Hilda is *felt* by the spectator of that play in a way it simply is not in a play like Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (1953), in which Godot's failure to arrive is largely represented as existential crisis. It is not that existential crisis à la Godot is anodyne, so much as the fact that NDiaye's play is weirdly infantilizing, creating the conditions, via Mme Lemarchand's child-like passion for a woman who is permanently absent, for the spectator to work him or herself into a frenzy of need. Like hungry children, we long for Hilda to arrive on stage, not so much because she is a symbol of the ineffable, but because, explicitly framed as a maternal figure, she promises – and fails – to take care of us. In the same way, the idea of a paternal ogre lurking in the house in *Les Serpents* is truly terrifying, the spectator's certain knowledge of the violence this man will do the vulnerable women and children characters who may come across him managing to tap into primitive infantile fears of masculine violence and threat. And the opening scene of *Les Grandes Personnes*, in which two parents come together to discuss their separate sightings of their dead daughter under the stairs of their home, resembles some kind of ghastly, ghostly primal scene.

NDiaye's plays are unashamedly mad and maddening. They achieve a strange feat, regressing the spectator to a place of great fear and vulnerability, while at the same time, on the surface, appearing relatively 'normal'. Their emotional strangeness can be felt, but it lurks in such a way as to render its embodiment on stage a genuine challenge. 'Savoir si ce que j'écrivais était "jouable" n'a jamais été une question, ou alors, implicitement, accompagnée d'un "qu'importe!" qui me paraît maintenant un peu désinvolte', NDiaye admits in the Comédie-Française programme notes for *Papa doit manger*, and she is correct implicitly to draw attention to the fact that what she writes runs a serious risk of not being interpreted very successfully. Many of the productions I have attended have been simply too timid, conservative – or perhaps simply insensitive – to capture the blank horror and *kitsch* that ought to dwell on the NDiayean stage. These are plays which, without exception, depict the psychic murder of characters who are already almost dead: this is difficult to show. The English production of *Hilda* at the Hampstead Theatre in 2006 opted for a kind of Wildean class satire rather than attempting to capture the truly ghostly dimension of Mme Lemarchand's obsession. Christophe Pertou's staging of *Les Grandes Personnes* at the Théâtre de la Colline in 2011 was an excessively Parisian parade of tricks and transgressions, going all out for shocks (such as the exposed anus and penis of the actor playing

the Schoolteacher, as well as a flying bird), but failing to develop the monstrosity of the spectral, wraith-like children. If the Comédie-Française's celebrated 2003 production of *Papa doit manger* remains one of the most successful visions of NDiaye, it is surely because of its excessive, unapologetic, slightly demented grandiosity. The blank psychoses of NDiaye's characters must be conveyed not through a bland adherence to convention but by a chorus of voices as fantastically eccentric as NDiaye's own.

‘Arbeit macht frei’: *Hilda* (1999)

NDiaye's first play, *Hilda*, has been described in a variety of different ways: as a Marxist–Leninist fable about the machinations of contemporary class relations (Rabaté, 2008); as a play about specifically feminine abjection and monstrosity (Lindley, 2010); and as a series of militant reflections on the obscenity of racialized slavery.⁴ It is, in my view, and in much the same manner as most of NDiaye's prose fiction, a text which certainly manages to speak of class, of ‘race’ and of gender, but which forces the spectator to reach whatever thoughts or feelings s/he may have about these topics through an extreme immersion in the staging of psychic and physical blank violence. Mme Lemarchand, the main speaker of *Hilda*, is a woman whose verbiage, like that of Beckett's Winnie, pours forth in a truly unstoppable torrent, submerging not only her fellow (non-) characters (Franck, Corinne, Hilda), but, of course, the members of the audience onto whom she spews. The force of her monologues comes from their macabre marriage of excess and nullity. Mme Lemarchand's sentences bowl her interlocutor over at precisely the same time as they void him or her of all emotionally meaningful content. Both interlocutor and the words themselves are sucked dry of whatever humanity they may have appeared to contain. Mme Lemarchand transforms whatever she attempts to interact with – be it linguistic, ideological or animal – into a hollow shell.

The play is bookended by two essentially anxious questions, both uttered (naturally) by Mme Lemarchand: ‘Que voulez-vous?’ (*H*, 7) and ‘Vous en souvenez-vous?’ (*H*, 91). Desire and memory are instantly rendered problematic for Mme Lemarchand, as she cannot be sure of the dependable functioning of either. Her project for the acquisition of a solid sense of her past and present self appears to depend upon obtaining clear and reassuring answers from her chosen substitute parents Hilda

and Franck. These worker-slaves are called upon both somehow to conjure into concrete being a sense of Mme Lemarchand's 'loveability' and to repair her nebulous, forgotten past. These unfulfillable needs make Mme Lemarchand into a character who is, at one level, poignant in her melancholic vulnerability and, at another, utterly monstrous. She is in need of a new parental figure to 'contain' her various unprocessed feelings of abandonment, but her disavowal of that need leads her to abuse, rather than simply use, the would-be containing maternal object that is Hilda. Simultaneously despised and envied, hated and loved, the desired object Hilda is, not unlike the child victims of the primary school teacher in the later play *Les Grandes Personnes* (2011), stripped, perhaps raped, emptied of emotional life, incorporated (as much as is possible) by her needy abuser, and eventually tossed out, her now useless shell having gone past its sell-by date. As Mme Lemarchand succinctly puts it to Franck in the play's final minutes: 'Hilda n'existe plus' (*H*, 91).

Mme Lemarchand needs Hilda in order to repeat – but neither to remember nor 'work through' – what appears to be her own extremely complex maternal trauma. Mme Lemarchand engages Hilda to be much more than a simple maid: she desires her as nothing less than a new, good, 'living' Mammy for both her and the gloomy Lemarchand brood, making it clear on several occasions that she herself is unfit for motherhood, being in some state of serious, possibly both suicidal and infanticidal, depression: 'J'ai besoin d'Hilda pour affronter la longueur des jours, pour sourire à mes enfants et résister au désir de nous faire, tous, passer de l'autre côté. Comprenez-moi, Franck, essayez de vous représenter quelle vie lamentable je mène, quel ennui j'éprouve, quelle médiocre mère je suis' (*H*, 70). Insisting on Hilda's need to be 'alive' ('Regardez comme elle est vive!', *H*, 52), Mme Lemarchand makes explicit from the very outset that it will be Hilda's capacity to be an alert, responsible, wide awake and present mother that is of the most fundamental importance: 'Trop de femmes sont immorales, dépressives, insouciantes, terriblement insouciantes [...] Je ne veux pas d'une femme qui néglige ou maltraite mes enfants sous l'empire d'un calmant ou d'un euphorisant' (*H*, 10–12). If Mme Lemarchand is incapable of being a happy mother to her children, of talking, playing and laughing with them 'comme il faut le faire' (*H*, 24), then at least Hilda can function as a bought-in source of novel maternal joy:

Hilda fera tout cela. Hilda parlera, jouera, rira avec mes enfants. Hilda fera tout cela à merveille. Il le faut, car j'aime mes enfants, et je ne veux autour d'eux que de la joie. Mais je ne peux pas avoir cette joie. Hilda

aura cette joie pour moi. Franck, Hilda est-elle naturellement joyeuse?
(*H*, 24)

Mme Lemarchand's stated wish to offer her children an atmosphere in which at least they might be able to thrive emotionally via a supplementary caregiver is, in many ways, an admirable one. But, quite apart from the economic and physical exploitation of Hilda on which that reparative project depends, we must note also that at the same time as she declares the need for Hilda to be happy and psychically alive, Mme Lemarchand reveals an anxious ambivalence around this putative quality of maternal joy. It is this anxiety that will lead her to enact a murderous fantasy, at the end of which Hilda can only emerge from the situation as 'dead' a mother as is Mme Lemarchand. No sooner has Hilda started working for her than Mme Lemarchand begins to obsess over a perceived deficiency of authentic aliveness in her new employee: 'Hilda sourit, oui, mais d'un sourire machinal où n'entre ni chaleur ni tendresse, et des lèvres seulement car son regard reste lointain' (*H*, 29). A few minutes later, she has worked herself up towards a declaration of her own worst nightmare. Hilda may not, in fact, be the longed-for loving pseudo-mother she had so set her heart on: 'Hilda n'a pas d'amour pour mes enfants' (*H*, 32).

From this point onwards, Hilda's function becomes, more than that of a modern 'slave', that of a powerless doll on which Mme Lemarchand can, in dialogue with her heavily 'oedipalized' rival Franck, project a lifetime of built-up resentment and paranoia surrounding the traumatic figure of the 'dead', depressed or otherwise unreachable mother. If, for Franck, Hilda has become worryingly 'triste' (*H*, 55) in the Lemarchand household, for Mme Lemarchand, Hilda is 'très gaie' but also 'froide [...] et taciturne [...] joyusement froide' (*H*, 55). Trying to find the precise formula with which to qualify Hilda's apparently changing emotional – and even ontological – state becomes a matter of the utmost urgency for the increasingly infantile Mme Lemarchand. 'Hilda n'est pas morte', she reminds Franck as he bleeds onto the stage floor. 'N'oubliez jamais qu'Hilda n'est pas morte' (*H*, 64). And yet all the while Mme Lemarchand's words and actions work to render Hilda ghostly and unreal, as she boasts first of the maid's spectral garden presence ('la petite silhouette bleu et blanc', *H*, 49) and later of her fantasized fairy rebirth as 'la petite danseuse au fond de la bouteille de cognac' (*H*, 50). It feels increasingly as if Mme Lemarchand's deepest need is to render Hilda simultaneously happy and dead, to experience her as a traumatic maternal statue that is nevertheless capable of being enlivened, at least

at some level, by the power of Mme Lemarchand's child-like love: 'Hilda souriait, Franck. Elle se taisait et souriait, immobile. Hilda est heureuse chez nous, elle est flattée et admirée' (*H*, 74).

Mme Lemarchand must kill the initially living Hilda, then, in order that she may act out the double fantasy of trying both to bring the now 'dead' mother back to life and hoping to gain nourishment and new life for herself and her children from that resuscitated mother. None of it works, of course. By the end of the play Mme Lemarchand is as languid and frustrated as ever – even if she now physically resembles Hilda – and her children are 'tristes et mal à l'aise' (*H*, 91). She still craves the curiosity and attention she has clearly never received, begging Franck and Corinne for their input: 'Fréquentons-nous, Franck, soyez curieux de moi' (*H*, 91). The denouement presents Hilda's transformation into an unrecoverable 'dead' mother at the hands of her demented would-be daughter Mme Lemarchand as final and complete:

Elle n'est plus froide ni distante, elle n'est plus rien, elle n'est plus que soumise et apathique, et pas efficace du tout. Je ne sais que faire d'Hilda, Franck. Toute vitalité l'a quittée. [...] Hilda est morte à présent, Franck, morte, morte. Il n'y a plus d'Hilda. [...] Elle est comme une poupée de chiffon et sa tête tient à peine sur ses épaules, Franck, tant Hilda est devenue indifférente à tout. (*H*, 88)

We spectators, helpless, immobile and, like Hilda, trapped on the margins of the stage, have witnessed the whole process taking place before our eyes – except, of course, that we have done no such thing. NDiaye has withheld the sight of Hilda from us throughout, just as the vengefully experimental 'child' Mme Lemarchand has withheld the sight of her new 'mother' Hilda from the jealous 'father' Franck. Hilda's fantastical, unbearable absence is rendered total and literal by a theatrical experience that methodically repeats what Ronald Fairbairn might call a 'tantalizing mother' experience, turning the audience into a room full of babies, desperate for their mother to arrive, teased by vague promises that, like Godot, she will be there soon, even, in certain productions, being allowed a glimpse of her shadowy form, but never satisfied by her living, maternal presence.

One cannot help but marvel at the extent to which the figure of Hilda mirrors NDiaye herself: coveted and garlanded by well-meaning liberals, pseudo-radicals and wealthy patrons, both women are beckoned to join powerful 'households', purportedly on terms of the strictest equality, but always with a whiff of exoticizing condescension. Both women play

a strange public game of politeness, relative compliance and reticence with those who have summoned them to the place of favour. If Mme Lemarchand ends up wailing, ‘Pourquoi Hilda ne me parle-t-elle pas, Franck?’ (*H*, 65), André Engel, the first director of *Papa doit manger*, frames NDiaye’s own Hilda-esque disposition in terms that place her, for the moment, on just the right side of frustrating: ‘Elle parle peu. Quand je suis allé la voir dans sa campagne bordelaise pour parler de la pièce, elle ne me répondait le plus souvent que par “oui” ou par “non”. Elle est énigmatique, c’est ce qui la rend séduisante’ (Kapriélian, 2003).

A Child is Being Eaten: *Providence* (ou le temps d’un retour) (2001)

A theatrical rewriting of NDiaye’s story for children *La Diabliesse et son enfant* (2000), it is difficult to imagine a more adult work than *Providence*. It is equally difficult to know quite how to approach it, as the play is so far removed from anything resembling realism that even the adjective ‘dreamlike’ is inadequate in conveying just how bizarre are the world of Providence and the villagers who have brought her so low. An air of pre-historic myth hangs over the piece, the personal catastrophes of Providence the woman merging with a more general sense of collective trauma. There are aspects of Providence’s experience that call to mind key elements of the lives of enslaved black American women. Her separation from her child by the men who violently impregnated her is reminiscent of a key ingredient of plantation life, and the spectral quality of the baby she has lost, a baby she may herself have killed, mimics the conceit at the heart of Toni Morrison’s epic novel of enslaved maternal suffering, *Beloved* (1987). The play is, more than anything, though, an exploration of an entire community’s neurotic response to the abuses which it has perpetrated, a response characterized, above all, by a refusal to acknowledge that any abuse has taken place.

The figure of Providence is the simultaneously blank and blackened repository for that community’s disavowed toxicity. Like the eponymous Algerian ‘heroine’ of Alain Resnais’s *Muriel ou le temps d’un retour* (1963) – a key cinematic example of a female, racialized, non-appearing central figure, whose structural *raison d’être* seems to be to soak up her violators’ disavowed hate, shame and the fresh trauma they experience after violating her – Providence is used as a hole, both literally and metaphorically, gang-raped by the male villagers and the

very incarnation of the blank amnesia that subsequently descends upon them and their collusive womenfolk. Deemed incapable of feeling and most probably guilty of the 'worst' aspects of the event (the alleged feeding of her baby to pigs), she is also constructed by the village's simultaneously racializing and sexualizing discourses as somehow less than human, with her putative strange hair ('poil inhumain', *P*, 17) and monstrous feet ('Ce ne sont pas des pieds!', *P*, 20). Hers is a body rendered at once hyper-sexual and bizarre (villagers argue among themselves about the precise shape and colour of her nipples, *P*, 38), like Hilda's – or that of a real-life enslaved 'freak like Sarah Bartmann, the so-called Hottentot Venus – considered fit for public exhibition even as there is debate over whether that same body should have been shaved and butchered or else burned alive (*P*, 39).

The community's only unity derives, it seems, from its shared interest in repressing the memory of the original act of abuse. The Schoolmistress enacts various different stages in the defensive subject's process of covering up her knowledge of what occurred: from flat out denial of knowledge ('Mais je ne sais rien, je ne sais rien', *P*, 27), she evolves to the angry assertion of the event's secret status ('Qui êtes-vous, enfin, pour prétendre vouloir connaître ce dont nous nous acharnons, depuis tant d'années, à ne plus parler?', *P*, 27), to a mode of tantalizing, Sphinx-like teasing: 'Tâchez de me deviner car je ne le dirai jamais explicitement et je ne décrirai rien, puisque je n'ai pas vu' (*P*, 28). Later in her non-testimony she deploys even more complex techniques of forceful blanking out, from questioning the identity of the one who may have been abused ('il se peut que ce soit Providence [...] qui ait été déchirée', *P*, 28) to a truly destabilizing combination of tactics according to which she simultaneously forbids the transmission of new knowledge and performs a robotic calmness: 'Ne répétez pas ce mot, ne le répétez pas! Je ... je vous le demande très instamment. C'est un des morceaux du corps de Providence dont je dois endurer le souvenir. Ne me faites pas dire que je l'ai vu – je ne sais rien ! Je suis distante et pondérée' (*P*, 29). The Schoolmistress's nuanced game of disavowal is mirrored in various different guises across the village. But, while both the (female) Pharmacist and the (male) Solicitor condemn the release of anything resembling emotional openness regarding the story of Providence ('C'est déjà trop de parler ainsi [...] Vous êtes déjà lyrique et emporté', *P*, 32), the Pharmacist nevertheless betrays an overwhelming desire to spit 'it' out once and for all, begging, in effect, for a chance at confession or psychotherapy:

J'étais sur le point de le dire! Je pouvais enfin le dire et vous m'avez
brisée! Pouvoir le dire, pouvoir le dire! Aidez-moi! Oh, oui, le dire enfin!
Je n'en peux plus!

[...]

Si, parlons, parlons, jusqu'à ce que je puisse enfin cracher ce nom qui
me barre la gorge. (*P*, 36–9)

With the Pharmacist's remarkable plea for an entry into speech, NDiaye's theatre sets an extremely significant process in motion. It starts to open up the recognition, via a 'blocked' character in extreme distress because of her 'blockage', of the need for language to translate the years of blankness into words. We will have to wait until Bella's obscene babblings in *Rien d'humain* (2004) and Nadia's long-delayed pronunciation of her granddaughter's name 'Souhar' in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (2007) for the next stages of this painful movement towards linguistic representation.

Meanwhile, *Providence* offers little in the way of resolution vis-à-vis the central 'blanked out' trauma. Providence herself is a deeply frustrating character, repeating that she wants justice for herself and her child, but ultimately chased and destroyed by the same people who attacked her in the first place. Unable, like Rosie Carpe, to remember much of what has happened to her, and forever crying out, again like Rosie, for the father of her child to come forward from the crowd of potential inseminators, Providence lingers recklessly in the still dangerous site of her trauma (as will Nancy in the later play *Les Serpents*), endlessly repeating the dissociated fragments of the past, but unable to reconstitute them into a workable narrative. Most maddeningly of all, she refuses the help of the investigator, a man who seems to have her best interests at heart or, at least, who seems committed to helping her get the whole story of her own disintegration. The Insurance Salesman, in his role as go-between, interferes with Providence and the Investigator's potential alliance: on the one hand he mockingly represents the latter to the former as both terrifying scientist ('Il veut, Providence, te fendre de bas en haut [...] il veut t'éventrer [...] il t'ouvrira doucement et il ... regardera', *P*, 60) and ghoulish hack ('il voulait un personnage [...] il dit que c'est de la littérature de pacotille' *P*, 62–6), on the other he teases her with the notion that this curious man could truly love her, seeing in her dreadful narrative of suffering a veritable saint's life: *Vie de Providence* (*P*, 61).

Vacillating wildly, unable to trust the Investigator's motives, Providence at first flirts with the idea of selling him her trauma, before giving up altogether on the interaction/transaction, declaring

that she feels nothing of the Investigator's love, good intentions or rewards: 'Dis-lui que je ne sens rien de ce qu'il s'était engagé à me fournir en quantité. Son amour, je ne le sens pas. Je suis glacée. Rien ne m'enveloppe. Il ne m'a pas rétribuée. J'ai froid et je raisonne. Oh, assureur, je suis en colère car on essaye de me tromper et de me voler' (*P*, 68). Conducting herself now like an author-prostitute, only capable of reaching into her traumatic past on condition that the unveiling of the trauma reward her with unspecifiable remuneration, Providence gives up the possibility of 'working through' whatever it is that has happened to her. NDiaye seems here to be presenting a key insight into the problem of the artist's use of her own past in the selling of her work. For she reveals the process as one which perhaps inevitably compromises whatever potentially therapeutic value the original delving into 'real' pain may have provided: the operation is rendered thoroughly commercial. A mercantile 'false self' takes over from an authentically curious one, pride and self-aggrandizement become the order of the day, and the 'star' subject herself loses all capacity to judge her present situation – and ongoing trauma – with wisdom, exposing herself to fresh sources of harm in the present.⁵

While the newly surrounded Providence fades away with a proud, bathetic 'prayer' ('Ne faites jamais, jamais de moi une femme ridicule, s'il vous plaît', *P*, 70) that seems to parody a more famous 'last request' of Frantz Fanon,⁶ NDiaye leaves us with an increasingly familiar figure: that of the undeveloped 'alternative self' of the self-annihilating heroine, represented elsewhere in the œuvre by the likes of Hilda's sister Corinne and Nadia's old friend Corinna Daoui. The Barmaid has already made an appearance, of course, and has regaled her audience with tales of her mad mother, missing father and poor treatment by her family. Unlike Providence, however, the Barmaid is able to discuss the question of mental health in a direct manner (*P*, 55), and appears to take extremely seriously the challenge of self-analysis. Making a point – unlike the majority of NDiaye's hyper-defensive protagonists – of the desirability of constructing a clear and accessible narrative and of actually seeing herself, she revels in the prospect of lucidity, self-acceptance and the steady flow of her tears and menstrual blood:

Le sang que je perds en un an ferait vivre un être complet, mais je ne l'exploite pas.

[...]

Voilà ma vie. On peut me photographier. Cependant je ne suis pas la poupée du premier venu. Mais je donne, prenez mon histoire, tout ce que

je suis, prenez, prenez, que je me voie enfin! Il me faut bien le regard de quelqu'un d'autre. Mes yeux à moi, tournés sur moi, sont voilés, brouillés de larmes nerveuses. (*P*, 55–7)

The Barmaid is an intoxicating character, and leaves the audience wanting more of her sanguine, sanguinary *puissance*. There seems so little of it, in NDiaye's bloodless universe, to go around.

My Heart Belongs to Daddy: *Papa doit manger* (2003)

Papa doit manger is not only a highly significant event in the history of French theatre for all the reasons that are well known (and discussed in the introduction to this chapter). It is also, in my view, NDiaye's most genuinely accomplished play, managing to draw together a multiplicity of powerfully contrasting aesthetic and generic strands – family melodrama, dime-store romance, absurd revenge thriller, hairdressing-witchcraft comedy, pseudo-multicultural parody and critique – with such remarkable deftness that the spectator emerges from the experience quite convinced that s/he has never seen anything of the kind in her life, except, perhaps, in dreams. We are no longer in the terrain of what has hitherto been understood as French theatre, no matter how avant-garde. With *Papa doit manger* NDiaye flexes her muscles in such a way as to make her uniqueness as a culturally and emotionally complex persona truly felt: there can be no mistaking this as the work of Ionesco, Cixous or Kane, no more than *Rosie Carpe* (the equivalent moment of absolute authority in the domain of the prose fiction) could have come from the pen of Kafka, Woolf or Duras. The only NDiaye play to contain such an abundance of tears, it is concomitantly the theatrical work the most laden with unfettered feeling, feeling which is uncomfortably adrift in the familiar sea of dried-up blankness. Those characters who eventually express genuine emotion in the play find that what they emit is contraband and shocking to the characters around them, the characters on whose approval they desperately depend. Overflowing with the twin 'child-elements' of love and need, both the child Mina and the adult Anna find that these intolerable aspects can be neither felt nor appreciated by the steely others on whom they attempt to expend them. Ending with the enigmatic phrase 'un amour inexplicable' (*PDM*, 95), the play explores the soul-deadening consequences for a family which cannot bear to use, touch or understand actual love, a family which uses the

concept of 'family love' as a tool for trade, exchange and, above all, the avoidance of responsibility.

It is perhaps a symptom of the blinding whiteness of the cultural desert into which high-profile representations of 'black people' are so often born that the African-ness of Papa (NDiaye's second *explicitly* non-white character, following on the heels of *Rosie Carpe's* altogether more sympathetic hero Lagrand) has been so unhelpfully emphasized. So often it is the case when discussing NDiaye and her work that subtle evocations of racialized difference tend to get pathologically occluded from a critical discourse keen to establish the writing as unequivocally 'universal', while the explicitly non-white representations towards which she has gradually drifted are fetishistically lingered on, exoticized and 'celebrated', rather than either accepted as 'normal' or else critiqued with politicized insight.⁷ The figure of Papa is a classic example of a NDiayean creation who has been enthusiastically 'blackened up' by a French cultural context eager to demonstrate an understanding of 'difference' at every level. Thus Nelly Kaprièlian's review of the 2003 Comédie-Française production reminds us (and it is a bizarre and important point) that 'André Engel a dû engager un acteur noir (Bakary Sangaré) pour jouer Papa, le "Français" n'ayant jusque-là pas songé à la faire', but goes on herself somewhat to over-racialize the character when she describes him as 'cet Othello de pacotille'. Similarly, the director André Engel shows an important awareness of the fact of Papa's blackness (which is, after all, of such pathological importance to so many – though not all – of the other characters), but seems to get carried away with his racially aware 'consciousness' in musings such as the following: 'Cet homme, ce Noir, cet Africain, incorrigible, irréformable, est abandonné par sa femme et renié par sa fille [...] Devons-nous y voir une allégorie du rapport [...] avec ce qu'ils appelaient autrefois 'le jeune continent africain?''⁸

Reducing Papa to an allegorical figure of Third World suffering unhelpfully obscures the fact that he is an especially complex addition to the NDiayean panoply of emotionally 'blank' parental abusers. Papa is a remarkably false and brittle protagonist. His fatherly 'affection' always studied, short-lived and accompanied by bribe-intended gifts and sweets, he displays the most spectacular capacity for flippant cruelty, particularly with regard to his two daughters, about whom he talks as if they were non-human, non-living vessels of limitless disappointment:

Cette fille-là ouvre la bouche mais on n'entend rien. Elle parle et parle dans la langue des carpes, les grosses carpes de rivière à la chair grise, au goût de vase. N'êtes-vous pas un peu trop grosses et lourdes, mes

filles? Deux belles chattes gracieuses et pas trop nourries: c'était mon espoir, non, ma certitude. (*PDM*, 25–6)

Relentlessly mythomaniacal, at times psychopathic, he speaks of himself in the manner of a broken mechanical toy ('C'est Papa! C'est moi!', *PDM*, 61), and almost exclusively in the dissociated third person. Like Mme Lemarchand, he constantly demands the food of other people's curiosity: 'Je veux de l'obséquiosité et de la fascination' (*PDM*, 27), while his desires regarding his three children are, in the case of the two elder girls, simultaneously incestuous and anorexia-inducing ('Il faut que ces deux filles maigrissent [...] Je veux être séduit', *PDM*, 27), and, in the case of the unnamed baby boy ('Bébé'), borderline infanticidal, the child functioning, like Steve or Titi from the second novel cycle, as the split-off repository of his own racialized, disavowed, 'toxic shame'.⁹ Unable to love any of his children in a responsibly parental capacity, Papa instead longs for his eldest daughter, even as a small child, to guide and parent *him*:

Il faut que tu m'aides.
Je suis fatigué. Je ne sais plus comment sortir [...]
Enfant, comment faire?
Comment puis-je faire? Aide-moi [...]
Mais, maintenant, que dois-je faire?
Enfant, comment puis-je faire? [...]
Aide-moi, mon enfant. (*PDM*, 61–3)

Papa, notes his adult daughter Mina gloomily, still caring for him years later, is worse than mad (*PDM*, 88).

Papa is, in fact, a bewildering composite of all NDiaye's differently spectral characters across the prose fiction and the theatre, an amazing kind of vaguely 1970s-inspired 'super-blank'. Like Diane Carpe, he is uncannily youthful in appearance ('Je me suis littéralement transfiguré', *PDM*, 23), and has fantastically 'washed-out' eyes (if hers are 'presque blancs', *RC*, 227, his are, paradoxically, so black that they are 'délavés', *PDM*, 11); like Herman's wife Rose, he vanishes from one day to the next from his family's life; like Fanny, he is wilfully 'blanked out' by those, such as Zelner, who refuse to see him ('Ce que vous êtes n'existe pas', *PDM*, 27); like the Devil of Kalane, he is never truly present, for, as a lucid Anna observes to Zelner: 'Quand il n'est pas là, devant moi, il me semble qu'il n'est rien – ou c'est le contraire parfois et sa présence est décevante. Il n'est jamais ce qu'on a pense qu'il était, ce qui fait, voyez-vous, qu'il n'est jamais véritablement là' (*PDM*, 69). If

a misrepresented Papa is oversimplified and 'blacked up' in the vast majority of journalistic and critical material dealing with the play, then, the pathological nuances of Maman's character are perhaps even more disturbingly passed over in favour of an emphasis on her whiteness and apparently romantic tendencies. Once again, it is the character's alarming manifestations of (a different kind of) dangerous blankness that are generally ignored. Maman is, however, the most terrifying of all NDiaye's characters by virtue of the manner in which she renders the violence of her own acts so utterly invisible. Like *La Sorcière's* Lucie, but far more manipulative, Maman believes in the reality of her own personally and socially responsible goodness. The way in which she talks about the asylum-seeking musicians (vaguely reminiscent of Providence's 'pig-musicians') whom she hosts in her living-room is not dissimilar to the hollow formulations of the self-professed radical Mme Lemarchand: 'Ce sont des êtres charmants, de charmants étrangers qu'on tourmente chez eux' (*PDM*, 49). Lines such as this ought to alert us to the fact that Maman is far from immune to the charge of falseness and fetishization, that we must be on our guard against accepting her as simply the dizzy victim of Papa's machinations. Maman speaks as though she had walked straight out of one of the television soap operas to which Fanny's mother, grandmother and Tante Colette are so addicted. The trite phrase 'mon dieu' (often used by NDiaye to signal an emotional and discursive impasse) slips off her lips *ad nauseam* (*PDM*, 29–31), while her rhetoric of endless, passive suffering ('Ce que j'ai souffert par lui m'a liée à lui pour toujours [...] Personne ne m'a aidée, alors / Ma solitude était absolue', *PDM*, 55) has a distinctly masochistic ring to it. Her immediate response to Papa's return ('Mon mari est revenu / Je le regarde et je l'aime! / Comme c'est humiliant', *PDM*, 34) paints her as a latter-day Phèdre, and inscribes her within a deeply self-indulgent narrative in which she emerges as the helpless plaything of her own otherworldly, transgressive desires.

The play's ludic evocation of Racine's *Phèdre* returns in the Aunts' *récit* of Papa's bloody knife-attack by Maman, which oddly resembles Thérémène's account of Hippolyte's destruction by the sea-monster. Perhaps more importantly, though, the Aunts' *récit* underlines the fact that Maman is a schizoid, unknowable being, having plotted this violent revenge against Papa from the start, apparently indifferent to the fact that her small daughters will have to bear the weight of witnessing the horror for the rest of their lives:

Leur fille armée d'un couteau et se jetant sur son mari, devant les gamines, et le sang partout, et tout le monde hurlant sauf lui – le nègre, paraît-il, n'a pas eu un cri – alors elle, comprenant qu'elle n'en viendrait pas à bout et se sauvant avec [...] les deux filles paralysées de terreur, le laissant là, lui, le laissant se remettre comme il pouvait pour aller faire recoudre sa figure en morceaux, sa damnée figure de nègre content de lui. (*PDM*, 75–6)

The fact of Maman's brutal knife-attack on Papa is something that strangely seems simply not to *register* on the intra-diegetic reality of this play, however. It is as if, once it has been reported by the ghoulish Aunts, it can be put into a drawer, and not allowed to impinge upon the accepted official narrative of Maman as Papa's victim. Even when the adult daughter Mina reports Maman's sadistic practice of fingering the aged Papa's badly healed scars (*PDM*, 82–3; we remember Nadia, desperate to plunge her fingers into her husband Ange's tempting wound), Maman manages to remain an essentially benevolent stereotype, as nobody seems capable of formulating a negative judgment against her, of actually suggesting that she may be as monstrous as Papa himself.

NDiaye gives indication upon indication that Maman is deranged (her bewildering scene with the Voice can surely be interpreted as a moment of post-breakdown psychosis), and yet the hard core of the character, as brilliantly played by Clotilde de Bayser in the 2003 Comédie-Française production, and as reinforced by Maman's grieving, slightly patronizing, respectable old lady turn in the final scene ('Allons-y, allons-y. Nous verrons plus tard. Quant à moi ... Je suis dans le deuil', *PDM*, 95) remains, against all the odds, one of long-suffering reasonableness. The disastrous effect on Mina and Ami of their parents' incessantly narcissistic behaviour becomes the play's only real way of communicating just how cannibalistic these self-absorbed, would-be 'star-crossed' parents really are. While Ami, who barely ever speaks, is spoken of by her adult sister Mina as having 'descendue très bas [...] cinglée d'une manière dont on ne peut rien faire, qui ne lui appartient pas' (*PDM*, 86), Mina herself shifts from uncannily mature pre-pubescent child-woman, 'une petite mère active, un peu soucieuse' (*PDM*, 24), concerned only for her own poor mother's well-being ('Maman doit se serrer sur les coussins, et son dos s'abîme, et ses jambes ne se reposent pas comme elles le devraient après tout ce temps passé debout', *PDM*, 22), to haggard, depressive wife and mother, envious of her now elderly mother's strange ability to shine despite everything: 'Seule, Maman rayonne. Son allure et son visage paraissent plus jeunes que mon allure, mon visage' (*PDM*, 81).

Described by that simultaneously cheerful and long-suffering mother when they are small as 'chères petites mortes' (*PDM*, 12), when they are grown women Mina and Ami appear to fulfil the maternal prophecy of total zombification.

I conclude my discussion of *Papa doit manger* by noting that its questions of 'race' and 'racial difference', so superficially revelled in by journalists, are far from irrelevant in discussions of this play: they merely need to be joined up to broader issues of psychopathology in order to be rendered at all worthy of politically engaged consideration. Through her depiction of the Aunts, in particular, NDiaye manages to convey a sense of the complete racialization of familial 'blank psychosis'. All the characters' internal sense of emptiness has somehow ended up getting refracted through a collective fantasy about Papa's 'blackness'. The already white Aunts' comical desire for reinforced whiteness in the form of blonde hair dye is part and parcel of their (also gendered) self-hatred. Disavowing their feelings of sexual worthlessness, the Aunts use the language of 'race' to whip each other up into an eroticized frenzy of hatred and envy.¹⁰ The dialogue they have during their 'witch's spell' scene (*PDM*, 72–4), in which they reminisce about Papa's and Maman's terrible but exciting wedding, is replete with images of their own uncontainable fluids: sweat, vomit, tears, and unnameable vaginal secretions. Ultimately, though, all their language of white contempt and arousal spins around the predictably 'blanked out' (non-) image of Papa's black penis, or rather, their fantasy of sex between Papa and their white niece ('toute mignonne, toute menue, et blondinette', *PDM*, 72):

Nous étions désespérés de ne pouvoir que l'imaginer, et il était insupportable de l'imaginer. Nous aurions voulu voir et ne jamais voir, savoir et ne rien savoir du tout et qu'il n'y ait rien à savoir.

[...]

Cette même pensée que nous avons tous t'avait rompue, anéantie.

Tu en crevais de ne pas savoir. (*PDM*, 74)

These lines contain perhaps NDiaye's most perfect synthesis of simultaneously racialized and sexualized blankness, and reinforce André Green's (1983) compelling hypothesis that behind every 'dead' mother complex – and who could be a more cheerily 'dead' mother than Maman? – lurks an unresolved 'primal scene'. The cultural spectre of 'black' Papa and 'white' Maman's terrible coitus props up the blank and withdrawn pathologies of every character before us, their banal

sexual act, as Fanon (1952) suggested long ago, the structuring fantasy for an already neurotic society made sicker still by the phenomenon of racialized hallucination.

The Intense Humming of Evil: *Les Serpents* (2004)

Les Serpents is one of NDiaye's more complex and repulsive plays. Eschewing the black comedy of *Hilda*, the melodrama of *Papa doit manger*, the stark simplicity of *Rien d'humain* (2004) and the redemptive final peace of *Les Grandes Personnes* (2011), it stages a dreamlike situation that appears to take place at the gates of Hell itself, or rather, NDiaye's secular version of Hell: an abusive family home in which a child has actually died at the hands of his demented caregivers. Like a strangely inverted version of Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie*, here the apocalypse is to be found inside the house rather than outside it, and the despotic old 'Hamm' figure is a woman, exercising her cruel authority over not one but two 'Clov' figures, both of them female. The sun beats down on the three female protagonists, Mme Diss and her two daughters-in-law, one ex, one current, in much the relentless manner as it does on the narrator and her possessed Auschwitzian child in *Y penser sans cesse* (2011). The fields of wheat glow with the same sickly yellow that hovered over Rosie Carpe's unprocessed but certainly demonic childhood. Even the family surname – 'Diss' – calls to mind one of the names of Hades, lord of the classical underworld.¹¹ The family home outside which the three women lurk carries the stench of a death-chamber, its inmates (various children, both living and dead) tied up and powerless, or else floating, spectral and un-mourned, its commandant an ogre-like bully (respectively son, ex-husband and husband of the three women) seemingly committed to performing acts of mental and physical cruelty. In many plot- and character-related respects, the play resembles the cannibalistic final section of NDiaye's later novel *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, with the cold and calculating mother-in-law Mme Diss shifting into the later work's narrator Nadia, the two wives Nancy and France becoming the novel's Yasmine and Wilma, and the play's invisible son-ogre acquiring greater definition and humanity in the novel as the bisexual despot Ralph.

Almost absurdly robotic and one-dimensional, the three protagonists sometimes strike the spectator as characters out of a particularly strange arcade-game, only allowed to enter or leave the house a certain number

of times, and always in danger of being 'zapped' as they do so. Nancy emerges as the game's plucky have-a-go hero, her ultimate mission becoming ever more clear: to enter the haunted house, to wake up and untie the frozen children, and bring them out into the open before their monster-father eats them.¹² Mme Diss frames the challenge in the following terms, insisting more on the minor, truly 'game-like' actions that her ex-daughter-in-law avatar must perform: 'Va faire là-dedans ce que tu as à y faire! [...] Préviens mon fils, rapporte de l'eau, un chèque pour la maman, habille-toi, tamponne-toi, fais sortir ces enfants, qu'on voie leur figure, et tout sera bien à l'endroit' (SE, 49). For bonus points, perhaps at a higher level of the game (a level which, alas, she fails to reach), Nancy might also want to visit her dead child's grave and so at last to make peace with herself. The murdered child Jacky remains an un-symbolized and ghostly infant presence, of course: like Bébé (in both *La Femme changée en bûche* and *Papa doit manger*), like Hilda's abandoned children, like Providence's mysterious newborn, eaten, perhaps, by pigs. The boy's spirit simply swirls around the family home, amongst the living (but threatened) children, as ungraspable and threatening as the various shifting and squirming black things that will fly out of Nadia's womb, or roll around the village's playgrounds in *Autoportrait en vert* (2005). And all the while the 14 July festivities continue, their jolly firework displays functioning as a vacuous community celebration as unstoppable as it is uncaring, as oblivious to the corpse of the snake-bitten little Jacky as the cheery fans of the new *Astérix* film in *Rosie Carpe* are to the nearly dead body of little Titi, lying in the sun amongst the rats. As Mme Diss's second daughter-in-law France explains, the public joy of a nation is an implacable and non-negotiable event:

Mais je peux bien, avant comme après, vivre dans l'attente du 14 juillet, puisque cela finit toujours soit par arriver soit par revenir. Il suffit d'en être certaine. C'est un désir perpétuel et toujours comblé, aussi ne croyez pas que je retombe, non, la vigueur de cet élan ne cessera qu'à ma mort, la joie qu'existe chaque année, un 14 juillet et un feu d'artifice, inéluctablement.

Pas de déception, pas de chute possible. (SE, 10–11)

NDiaye explores the horrible psychological logic of abusive care-giving in a number of earlier and later works, but in this play the figure of the snake is used as a particularly powerful metaphor for the narcissistic parent's incorporation of his or her child. Parents 'eat' their offspring

whole, leaving no trace, and in this sacrificial act of eradication they are able to delay or quieten the symptoms of their own traumatic childhoods. Mme Diss – like Nadia, and like the aged Papa who ‘doit manger’ – arrives at her adult son’s house because she needs money and she needs sustenance in whatever form he can offer. She is not interested in love in the conventional sense of the term (although she is willing, like Papa, to fake it in exchange for money), and the idea that she is actually the parent of her son rather than the other way around appears to be unthinkable: ‘Vous devez me compter comme l’un des enfants,’ she tells her second daughter-in-law, France. ‘Vous devez vous occuper de moi. Vous devez prendre toute la responsabilité de ma personne. Moi, je peux plus’ (SE, 73). A woman of seemingly inexistent emotional insight or capacity for self-reflection, she cannot countenance the possibility of her own culpability and, above all, refuses to accept the potential validity of her son’s avoidance of her: ‘Pourquoi m’évite-t-il, dis-moi? [...] Pourquoi donc?’ (SE, 10). Demanding nothing but unwavering acknowledgment and respect from her adult offspring (‘qu’il vienne me reconnaître’, SE, 42), Mme Diss is perhaps the most flint-hearted female character in all NDiaye’s theatre, taking pride, like Papa, in her preternatural lack of sentiment (‘Je reste nette et froide, Nancy [...] Je reste exacte, rigoureuse et froide’, SE, 52–3), and an approving collaborator in her grandson’s physical abuse by her son: ‘Je ne le battais pas mais je ne trouvais pas déshonorant qu’il fût battu’ (SE, 33). The soliloquy of maternal rage and self-justification in which she indulges in the final scene is the exact opposite of the healing ‘maternal reverie’ spoken of by Wilfred Bion (1962) in his discussion of ‘alpha function’, the caregiver’s capacity to convert the infant’s fear and panic into tolerable feelings:

Pourquoi ce garçon, toi, haïssait-il sa propre mère?

C’est que tu étais mauvais de naissance. Bon. Pourquoi me sentirais-je blâmable d’avoir un mauvais fils? Je ne me sens pas blâmable d’avoir un mauvais fils, j’en suis attristée et gênée devant le monde, voilà tout.

Alors je me prépare mon petit lapin en gibelotte et je veillerai que tu n’y touches pas. Cela t’apprendra. Désormais je festinerai toute seule et toi, pour manger, tu feras comment?

Tu te débrouilleras. (SE, 85)

Ultimately, Mme Diss emerges, like nearly all the overtly terrifying parent figures of the NDiayan oeuvre (Tante Colette, *La Sorcière*’s Isabelle, Mme Lemarchand) as not only fundamentally melancholic (‘je suis terriblement déprimée’, SE, 87) but also in a state of blank psychic

oblivion: 'Je me souviens du père de mon fils? Pas du tout' (*SE*, 89). It is impossible to say whether or not her son suffers from the same feelings of nullity as his mother, since his character remains permanently offstage, but the way in which much of his abuse of his own son Jacky is described by Mme Diss would suggest that it too is rooted in the trans-generational pattern of ego-feeding through the practice of child sacrifice. Once he has killed his son, the grandmother flippantly tells us, he himself flourishes: 'La jeunesse et la satisfaction l'illuminaient de l'intérieur, tendaient et polissaient sa peau, embrasaient ses yeux. Je lui ai dit, en lui tapotant la joue: tu t'es nourri de Jacky, tu t'es engraisé de lui' (*SE*, 56). Jacky's own pain, on his way to death, meanwhile, is, like that of both Providence ('Si tu souffres c'est que tu n'es pas Providence', *P*, 26) and Papa ('les nègres ont la peau plus dure', *PDM*, 71), strenuously disavowed by his abusers. The child is constructed by both father and grandmother as somehow beyond suffering. Like the villagers in *Providence* and the Aunts in *Papa doit manger*, they manage to project an image of their victim as a super-being, so inherently strong-willed, unfeeling, self-sufficient and internally powerful that he will, improbably, be able to withstand whatever violence they mete out to him: 'Mais, pour le garçon, c'était égal. Il ne sentait plus rien, à l'abri de lui-même, protégé par sa délicatesse. Le père, pour se monter, devait faire chaque jour davantage et, le comprenant, voyant l'infériorité, il en voulait à ce fils passionnément, fanatiquement' (*SE*, 32). It is the abusing father's envy of his small son Jacky, then, that appears to lie at the root of the abuse, envy of the child's very sense of self, a sense of self lacking in the father and which he must accordingly swallow up in order to protect his own weak or non-existent ego. Refusing to let his own mother swallow or spectralize him, Mme Diss's son survives the rigours of maternal assault only by creating his own smaller victims, by actively choosing the role of ogre-father rather than ghost-child. He provides a fascinating example of a character who, rather than waste away or die at the hands of his abusive parent, enters into a simultaneously rivalrous and collaborative partnership with her. Mother and her adult child thus attain an eventual closeness of sorts by coming together to destroy a third person, Jacky, a supernatural scapegoat whom together they may render perennially tiny and endlessly punishable.

Les Serpents is – like all NDiaye's work after *Rosie Carpe* – concerned with one key question: how does one break out of the cycle of abuse? Is one forever condemned to the status either of deathly infant or monstrous parent? A potential third way may lie in an awakening to

the reality of the situation one finds oneself in, and that awakening is offered to Nancy in the play's final third. Having forced herself to listen to Mme Diss's account of what happened to her own child Jacky at the hands of her former husband, Nancy realizes that she can no longer maintain the pretence of non-responsibility. While she has hitherto clung to a stance of hopeful delusion ('Oui, il l'embrassait. S'il te plaît', *SE*, 30) and self-justification ('Je n'avais pas de voiture et pas d'argent [...] Comment j'aurais pu venir?', *SE*, 35), she will eventually come, via sudden, terrible regret, to a place of acceptance and resolution: 'Jamais plus je n'aurai peur de ma vie [...] C'est que je n'en peux plus d'être ce que je suis' (*SE*, 42, 58). This is a remarkable moment in NDiaye's œuvre, for it marks that rare event in the writer's work: a character finally recognizing that they have been complicit in their child's suffering and actually deciding to aspire to a new form of morality. Nancy will spend the rest of the play with only one goal in mind: to re-enter the house of hell in order to leave it, once and for all. This is nothing less than a shamanic enterprise, a return to a site of traumatic horror, which may facilitate a work of mourning and growth. If Nancy is made aware of anything in listening to Mme Diss's sickening, prostituted testimony to Jacky's suffering, it is the importance of locating both the phantom and the crypt she has been hitherto striving to ignore, and in so doing enacting an act of counter-normative reparation, in contrast to the empty 14 July celebrations taking place against a backdrop of silent horror:

C'est aujourd'hui feu d'artifice et c'est aussi l'anniversaire de la mort du garçon, alors je viens pour que nous allions, le père et moi, sur la tombe (c'est une tombe?) pour qu'ensemble nous nous inclinions bien bas au-dessus de la petite âme du garçon, et que nous nous excusions puisqu'on ne peut plus lui demander pardon et qu'il nous l'accorde.

Ensuite je m'en irai et je ne reviendrai plus. (*SE*, 39–40)

If this were a later work by NDiaye, there might be a chance that Nancy would be allowed to triumph in her act of courage, that something resembling cathartic peace might be reached on a stage that has hitherto conveyed nothing but ugliness and cruelty. As it is, the mission is doomed to failure. Glamorous career woman Nancy may have shown herself prepared to swap identities with her lowly (and vaguely racialized) replacement France, going back inside the foul old house so that a fantastically reborn France may finally leave it, but the exchange is, ultimately, hollow and gratuitous. No real alliance,

emotional or political, has been formed between the two wives, and they change places in a spirit of avoidance and non-communication.¹³ France's emergence from domesticated zombification ('Comme j'ai dormi longtemps!', *SE*, 68) metamorphoses simply into frivolous vanity ('Je suis chic, j'ai de la classe, j'en impose. Je joue!', *SE*, 71) and a perverted relationship with Mme Diss, a variation on the bizarre mother-and-second-daughter-in-law intimacies of Nadia and her unlikely gynaecologist Wilma in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*. Meanwhile, Nancy, once inside the house, swiftly crumbles, completely overwhelmed by sudden fear and a ghastly resignation to her fate: 'Cette maison est fétide, je suis la dernière à être mangée' (*SE*, 84). The play is, in the final analysis, a somewhat sadistic exercise in the staging of failed atonement and failed revolution. Even if Nancy makes the journey towards a 'prise de conscience' following Mme Diss's recollections, the precipitating 'memories' were already soiled and damaged by their commercialization by the rapacious old woman. Access to the traumas of the past has been blocked for Nancy by an all-pervasive culture of transaction, a culture in which she has participated fully.¹⁴ It is small wonder that her attempt to act 'authentically' on the basis of this kind of exchange is susceptible to failure. Rather than offering us a blueprint for new forms of love and loyalty, then, the final scene functions as a nasty reinforcement of absolute coldness and horror: France and Mme Diss argue and rave outside the house, seven years later, lost in a delirious dialogue of forgetting, of sex, of starting again. As for Mme Diss's remark apropos the children left inside the house all those years ago, it could be equally applied to the children of all NDiayean theatre: they have not grown at all (*SE*, 92).

L'An V de la révolution ndiayienne: *Rien d'humain* (2004)

Commissioned by the Comédie de Valence for a season on ghosts (Bouteillet, 2009), *Rien d'humain* is a short and extremely elliptical play, in comparison to which many of NDiaye's other theatrical works appear rich in detail, almost baroque. It is also, in comparison to the other plays, refreshingly revolutionary in tone, containing, in the figures of Djamila and her spectral infant, a force that threatens to dismantle white, bourgeois, patriarchal and fundamentally abusive established power structures in an explosive manner that is scarcely evoked by comparable violated mother/ghost child dyads such as Rosie and Titi,

Nancy and Jacky, or Providence and her baby. The colonized parent and her phantom child in this play resemble figures from some of Michael Haneke's most accomplished cinema of the 2000s: like the exploited and semi-adopted French-Algerian character Majid and his adult son in the film *Caché* (2005), like the sinister brood of village children in *The White Ribbon* (2009), Djamila and the invisible infant create a powerful enough energy to cause their disingenuous oppressors to come face to face with the traumatic damage they have helped to bring about. From the play's outset Djamila has managed to turn on its head the knot of power and property that has cemented the capacity of a character like Mme Lemarchand for limitless material and psychic abuse.

The Arabic-named Djamila¹⁵ is the first of NDiaye's theatrical victim-figures to strike back fully against those who have invaded her mind and body and expected her to keep quiet about the experience. Unlike Hilda, Providence or even Papa (whose body is slashed and penetrated without this ever being properly acknowledged within the discourse of the white characters, including his knife-wielding wife, for whom he is the 'real' villain), Djamila responds to her patronizing colonization with radical, illegal and unapologetic counter-violence, seeming to take inspiration from Hilda's sister Corinne's baleful warning to Mme Lemarchand at the end of *Hilda*: 'Mais si vous saviez à quel point elle vous déteste. Vous l'écarteriez de vous au plus vite si vous le saviez. Elle rêve de vous voir crever, vous et vos enfants' (*H*, 79). Djamila is the Corinne who is prepared to put her hate-filled reflection into practice, the Hilda who, emerging from neurasthenic blankness, suddenly finds sufficient energy to open her mouth and to begin to act in a disobedient, anarchic and self-liberating fashion. The process of transformation through which Djamila passes signals a real rupture in the inevitability of the NDiayan *métèque* figure's self-erasure through grateful integration. Djamila has no truck with servile gratitude, a concept she contemptuously and ironically exposes as yet another means for the colonizer to maintain his or her authority over the lowly being s/he claims to have 'improved':

Tirons Djamila de son taudis, forçons-la à considérer son passé avec dégoût, sa famille avec horreur, et que notre immense charité l'étouffe de préceptes et de principes [...] [L]a voilà transfigurée! Djamila ! La voilà, toute à nous, toute neuve et nettoyée et polie, par l'action de nos bienfaits [...] Souris, sois des nôtres.

Ma gratitude doit être considérable. (*RH*, 24)

Putting her resolution to break with her 'friend' Bella, as well as Bella's abusive father and brothers, in the starkest and most final terms possible, Djamila notes: 'Son père m'a tout donné. Le temps du père est fini et le temps de la fille Bella est fini. Le temps est fini de ces gens-là' (*RH*, 40).¹⁶

Through Djamila's uncompromising statements and monologues NDiaye fabricates a new paradigm of 'blankness', a stance of utter detachment that has become chillingly depersonalized for reasons of politicized necessity. Djamila declares the notion of friendship with Bella null and void ('on n'est pas l'amie d'une fille infiniment plus riche que soi', *RH*, 21) not because she is necessarily incapable of emotional intimacy but because she is attempting to expose the hypocrisies, capitalist and otherwise, of pseudo-intimacy. She assaults the practices and discourses of 'liberals' and 'do-gooders' ('Bon Dieu, crois-tu que je puisse laisser impuni autant de philanthropie?', *RH*, 26) not because she is necessarily diabolical, but in a bitter determination to reveal the capacity of those 'liberals' and 'do-gooder' for collaboration with rape, theft and torture. In a monologue that appears grounded in both Fanon's principles of violent decolonization and Genet's ethic of proud criminality, Djamila leaves no room for doubt regarding the direction of her newly autonomous, self-awarded *puissance*:

Elle veut, maintenant, pour me dominer, prétendre me donner l'appartement. Mais elle ne me donne rien – tu entends? [...] C'est moi qui prends et qui possède. Je suis là-bas chez moi car je l'ai décrété. On ne me donne plus rien. On ne m'assujettit plus à la grandeur d'âme. Je suis une pierre. Je ne suis coupable de rien. Je ne suis pas gentille et je ne suis pas cruelle, et qu'on ne me juge pas, car je suis une pierre. (*RH*, 42)

We have remained close and yet travelled very far from the 'stone-being' of the narrator of *La Femme changée en bûche* (1989), who may have derived a certain comfort and insight from her brief transformation into a pebble, but whose various metamorphoses seemed to take place largely outside of her control, according to the peripeteia of her fluctuating circumstances and moods, and quite removed from a politicized or revolutionary context. Djamila's is a *prise de conscience* that interprets the spectral elements of Fanon's violence literally. She conjures up a truly postcolonial baby, 'cette présence hostile et polaire' (*RH*, 34), the fruit, perhaps, of rape by Bella's father, but equally possibly – or at one and the same time – a self-generated fantastical entity, like Isabelle Adjani's octopus-like offspring in Andrzej Zulawski's remarkable film

Possession (1981), capable of resisting and repulsing new oppressors by any means necessary. ‘Vous m’avez fait former des fantômes, qu’il faudra que je réalise’, the Marquis de Sade is said to have written to his wife from prison in 1783 (Boulé, 1999: 134). Djamila acts out that ghostly, whispered promise for her horrified mistress Bella, giving it a militant dimension that is truly startling.

This play also occupies a radical function at a linguistic level within NDiaye’s corpus. Bella’s vomiting up of violent words and phrases is an uncontrolled representation of traumatic assaults suffered in the past by Djamila and witnessed, then repressed, by Bella. NDiayean theatrical language is at last allowing itself to convey badly buried experience rather than consigning it to the repository of blankness. Like the unstoppable bodily fluids and various black shapes of the later prose fiction, Bella’s linguistic eruptions, these italicized ‘mots qui roulent de ma bouche [...] des bestioles un peu répugnantes dont la bave tache le devant de mes vêtements, l’intérieur de mon âme’ (*RH*, 17) signal the necessary breaking down of psychic defences that can no longer prevent emotional truth from emerging. The spillages are violent, involuntary and obscene:

Mais je suis chez moi et ma confiance renaît et je voudrais que la conclusion *le plaisir avec eux abominable* de notre accommodement ait lieu sans brutalité.

[...]

Et je souhaite que mes enfants *laquelle sera prise* connaisse ta fille *prise et prise et prise*. Empêche les crapauds de sauter hors de ma bouche!

[...]

Comme tu étais naïve, inexpérimentée *pas belle mais sans danger baisée*.

[...]

Et sous ton petit crâne tout rempli d’idées superstitieuses, de croyances imbécile *sous ton petit corps petit industriel sous ce corps, qui pouvait bien s’étendre mou abandonné qui?*

Je ravale mes mots, mon amie. (*RH*, 28–30)

But however nasty or uncomfortable they are for their vehicle Bella, these emissions signal a key psychic and aesthetic breakthrough in the world of NDiaye. For they mark the moment when *language* can at last be made to contain the toxic shame of the past. Could it be that the era of using human repositories – here, Djamila – for the intolerable, split-off affect of the abusers, is drawing to a close?

Turning the Screw: *Les Grandes Personnes* (2011)

An interval of seven years separates *Les Grandes Personnes* from the cluster of plays we have looked at so far. During this period, NDiaye not only became a far better known figure of the French literary world, thanks to the publication of the Goncourt-winning *Trois femmes puissantes* in 2009, but also left France to settle in Berlin, apparently for the long term. Leaving her long-standing publisher Minuit in 2004, she signed with the more mainstream Gallimard, who published *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and most of the texts following it. She also co-scripted the filmmaker Claire Denis's 2009 film *White Material*.¹⁷ There is a significant hiatus in the theatrical project, then, as NDiaye's fame develops as a novelist and highly spectacularized 'personality'. It seems to me not entirely coincidental that during this period of wider diffusion NDiaye's prose work acquires a rather more palatable humanism, a tendency towards situations of unlikely redemption that were entirely eschewed in the earlier work. Her eventual return to theatre to some extent duplicates the Gallimard novels' capacity for not always convincing niceness. As with the later prose, *Les Grandes Personnes* suffers slightly in an incongruous drift towards 'uplift'.

NDiaye revisits many old themes in this play, but handles them in ways that feel, at times, superficial, crowd-pleasing, even 'liberal'. The long-established theme of class movement – and the difficulty of maintaining friendship once one of the partners has 'betrayed' his or her social origins – is observed here in the uneasy relations between the two middle-aged couples, although the situation contains none of the horror, poignancy or wit of *En famille*, say, or the short story 'La Mort de Claude François' (2004). As for the valiant figure of Madame B., in her NDiaye once again explores the possibility of a brave (or foolhardy) outsider who must confront the corruption of an abusive institutional power system. But the representation, unlike that of *Rosie Carpe*'s all too human Lagrand, or *Rien d'humain's* complex, bitter Djamilia, is heavy-handed. Madame B. is the text-book 'good foreigner', capable of radical forgiveness while at the same time in possession of a sound moral base that allows her to have a clear and unwavering sense of herself as authentic and real. Like the long-suffering and equally heroic Khady Demba of *Trois femmes puissantes*, Madame B. serves no function other than to illustrate a seemingly non-European ethic that refuses to be ground down by corrupt circumstance, but whom, as

was the case with Khady Demba, NDiaye's text will sweep away like so much exotic detritus.

The central mystery on which the play's psychological drama hinges is the monstrous sadness/madness embodied by the three adult children: the Schoolteacher (Georges and Isabelle's son), the Son (Éva and Rudi's adopted son) and the Daughter (Éva and Rudi's apparently biological daughter, secretly fathered by Georges). Why does the Schoolteacher rape the small children in his care? Why does the Son carry fantastical Voices in his chest? And how has the Daughter come to be a spectral revenant rather than a living human being? Aspects of the play appear to indict unintentional parental failure as the source of insurmountable childhood trauma that has persisted into depressed and deranged adulthood. Éva and Rudi are revealed from the outset as weak but well-meaning characters, desperately hoping that the reality of their daughter's ghost will disappear if they keep quiet about it long enough. As Éva puts it in the play's opening lines: 'Tant que je n'en parlais pas, ce n'était qu'un songe un peu déplaisant' (*LGP*, 11). But their intentions are good, the mother insists, and she and her husband have done nothing but love their two children. Perplexed at the Voices' demonic desire to see the parents dead, a hand-wringing Éva is martyr-like and plaintive:

Nous n'avons lésé personne.

Nous sommes innocents.

Nous vous aimions tant, tous les deux.

S'il faut maintenant punir la mort, le dévouement, la volonté de faire au mieux, et encore l'amour, les flots d'amour, s'il faut punir le moral et l'abnégation, alors ils sont dans le vrai, ces deux cadavres qui te harcèlent, et nous méritons de mourir, nous le méritons. (*LGP*, 42–3)

The play thus presents a world in which fundamentally benevolent parents must suddenly contend with children apparently so damaged by childhood that they either bear or have actually turned into ghosts and ghouls. This is trauma with no clear instigator, and these are, in NDiaye's world, relatively new kinds of parents, guilty of neither abuse nor flagrant neglect. It is true that Isabelle lets slip a character that seems, at times, insanely – hilariously – devoid of empathy. Her bizarre confession to her best friends Éva and Georges that she envies them the drama of being haunted by a ghost-daughter (*LGP*, 12) reveals early on that she is a woman whose emotional capacities are limited. When she declares to Éva and Georges's son that, for her, 'un enfant

ingrat mérite la mort' (*LGP*, 71), the audience is left in doubt of her flashes of madness.

Éva and Rudi may be a little nervy and evasive, but they seem to have acted with the best will in the world: how can we accuse them of being at the root of their daughter's addictions and subsequent death, or their son's possession? Isabelle and Georges may be eccentric to the point of perversity – they quiz their son the Schoolteacher over dinner about his semen's precise degree of whiteness – but at least they appear to love and cherish him. Even if Georges and Éva were duplicitous in their concealment of the Daughter's actual parentage, and even if Rudi and Georges were over-optimistic in their hope that the Son's faraway origins could be simply forgotten, and even if Isabelle is a little bit blank and crazy, is it fair to conclude that all this is at the root of such demented progeny? Surely, we ask ourselves, these four well-meaning 'grandes personnes' cannot be held to account for the fact of their terrifying offspring – their cadaverous visages, their demonic voices, their multiple sex-attacks on vulnerable children? It is difficult to know in which direction NDiaye wishes to push her audience. It feels as if, in this short play, she is brainstorming ideas about parenting in a wild and multi-directional manner, seeking, on the one hand, to situate evil within the stock melodramatic trope of familial 'secrets and lies', on the other, to suggest that all childhood experience is potentially traumatizing, on a third – in keeping with the suggestion that NDiaye is made up of at least two people! – to hint, here and there, at the omnipresent possibility of inappropriately sexualized parent-child interaction and, on a fourth, that much of the blame can be laid at the door of the parents' racialized insensitivity. There is nothing wrong with such a wealth of theories, of course – why should the malaise not come from all of these things and more? – but rather that so few of the ideas are properly developed, with the result that they all begin to feel a little throwaway.

The Daughter's monologue at the end of Scene VIII deserves some close analysis, however. It appears to posit a theory of emotional damage that seeks not to blame any specific act on the part of the parents, but rather a nebulous, non-locatable climate of 'wrongness':

Je ne sais pas l'exprimer.

Malgré la joie, malgré l'amour, malgré l'abondance, l'excès de tout... Il y avait quelque chose de déplacé, de malvenu, quelque chose qui n'aurait jamais dû être et qui vivait, qui était là, dans ma personne.

Une faute avait été commise et s'épanouissait et ce n'était pas bien.

Il fallait que quelqu'un soit puni, et il m'a semblé que ce devait être moi.

Je me suis bien punie, tu sais.

Mais, au moins, est-ce que je ne vous ai pas protégés? (*LGP*, 60)

This is a deeply powerful and unsettling set of lines which, after so many plays by NDiaye that point to past acts of clear parental failure as instrumental in the child's disintegration, feels like a new, almost revisionist way of looking at things. It is almost as if NDiaye, like Freud, when, a century earlier, he retracted his 'seduction theory' in favour of an insistence on infantile 'fantasy', has thought better of being so quick to lay everything at the door of poor old father and mother.¹⁸ The 'faute' thus becomes generalized, everywhere and nowhere at the same time: it lurks in disavowed adultery, in misguided cross-cultural adoption, in foolish words, in too much love. The problems that arise for the children must be put down to the rough-and-tumble of family life in a reality of fallible individuals. A perhaps less facile way of interpreting the vastness of the 'faute' could, of course, be to see in it a statement of radical anti-familial sentiment, implying, as it does, that the parent-child dynamic, or even the fact of generation itself, is *fundamentally* abusive. This would situate the play rather closer to the ideas of a thinker such as Alice Miller, whose general position (1987 and 1998) can be summed up in the idea that parents, by hook or by crook, get rid of their pain, whatever form this pain may take, by consciously or unconsciously attempting to pass it on to their children. The Daughter appears to echo that position when she tells the Son (*LGP*, 56) that if she has had to seek refuge, in ghost form, under the staircase, it is only because, never having herself become a mother, she has no poor child's heart in which to take up comfortable residence. Yet another way of interpreting the Daughter's words is via reference to Abraham and Torok (1986) and their theory of internalized 'crypts' of familial trauma, trickling down the generations in such a way that a child can find herself inhabited by the 'phantom' of her drowned great-uncle, say, without any parental abuse actually having taken place.

It is the Daughter who provides almost all the play's moments of emotional and intellectual insight, by virtue both of what she actually says and the terrible, indigestible spectrality of her stage presence. When she suggests that even if she was loved by her parents she was also filled intolerably to the brim, overstuffed with feelings and desires she could not possibly assimilate, she creates a crucial image of the child as helpless receptacle ('une vaste poche remplie', *LGP*, 77), her submission

to overwhelming tides of parental 'love' as potentially damaging as little Karim's invasion by the Schoolteacher's 'sexe en plastique' (*LGP*, 49), the latter image seeming less gratuitous as it obscenely conveys a wider truth.¹⁹ We are better-equipped to see how the Schoolteacher too has been used as an inappropriate container for *his* parents' fears, dreams and desires: as Isabelle blithely puts it, 'Nos vilaines pensées s'épanchent vers lui sans l'infecter, et nous nous purifions [...] Ce qui nous hante, son vaste cœur peut l'absorber' (*LGP*, 62).²⁰ Finally, the Daughter's interactions with her adoptive brother, the Son, facilitate perhaps the most staggering instance of meaningfully intelligent communication in all NDiaye's work thus far. The way the spectral woman interacts with the supernatural beings which inhabit her living brother represents a truly radical representation of psychic exchange. Aspects of the human self that are ordinarily denied, repressed and blankly buried – the daughter's ghostliness, the son's barking internal objects – are given dramatic expression on the NDiayean stage, allowed to interact with one another in a demonstration of quite madly intelligent beauty. We have travelled a long way from Mme Lemarchand and her annihilating procedures of psychic and physical murder in *Hilda*. In *Les Grandes Personnes*, NDiaye has, for all the play's faults, begun to rehearse an almost shamanic depiction of therapeutic listening, one subject 'tuning in' to another, so as better to hear the substance of what ordinarily cannot and will not be comprehended. NDiaye's magical use of the theatre has begun to turn blankness into something impossibly alive.

Little Baby Nothing: Framing the Invisible Child

One day, the child's mother had been away for several hours and on her return was met with the words, 'Baby o-o-o-o!' which was at first incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that during this long period of solitude the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach to the ground, so that, by crouching down, he could make his mirror-image 'gone'.

Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and other Writings*

The novels, plays, short stories and children's books of Marie NDiaye are littered with unwanted, hated, invaded children. Even in the enigmatic textual and photographic 'self-portrait', *Autoportrait en vert* (2005), children, including the narrator's own ever-proliferating brood, wander, unsupervised and often vaguely feared by their caregivers, through peculiar stories and images of hostile, reluctant or merely ghostly parenting. The figure of the child as universal scapegoat has always been prominent in NDiaye's world: one thinks of the hapless Bébé in *La Femme changée en bûche* (1989), burned up by his mother in a coat specially commissioned from the Devil, or Fanny's little messenger-girl at the end of *En famille* (1990), scalded and maimed by the family who sees in her an emanation of the hated Fanny herself. In the second novel cycle, the child becomes more significant still, as all the protagonists begin, as NDiaye herself was doing, to reproduce. This group of texts heralds the arrival of NDiaye's most iconic infant victims: *La Sorcière's* Steve (1996) and *Rosie Carpe's* Titi (2001), both boys sacrificed on the altar of their mothers' need to be free of the burden of parenting, even if this means abandoning the child to perish among rats and rotten guavas.

If the meat-loving adult son Ralph of *Mon cœur a l'étroit* (2007) signalled the dangerous possibility of a grown-up child's vengeance on his abuser, by the time of *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) NDiaye had returned to portraits of children as utterly devoured by their parents, both Sony and Djibril (little boys again) reduced and defeated by their selfish, predatory or merely depressive 'caregivers'. NDiaye's theatre, as we have just seen, takes the child into more frightening territory still. The various abandoned, sickly, dying or spectral babies, foetuses, infants and children of *Hilda* (1999), *Providence* (2001), *Papa doit manger* (2003), *Les Serpents* (2004), *Rien d'humain* (2004) and *Les Grandes Personnes* (2011) are overwhelming in their ghostliness. Not only deadened, they are also rendered less than human. In these dreadful plays, children are often casually associated by their parents with beasts, this conflation reaching its climax once the adult protagonists reach the stage of being unable to distinguish the child in question from an animal (often an unnameable one). This stage is usually accompanied by the child's enforced promiscuity among actual animals (snakes, pigs), instruments of abuse (dildos, belts), and is followed by the child's sudden or gradual psychic or physical disintegration. Stigmatized even more harshly than the adult protagonists (who themselves struggle with marks of various kinds), NDiaye's children are forced to bear not only their own stigmata but also those of their parents, or of people older still, sometimes dead, which are projected onto them with intolerable psychic violence. NDiaye's children must literally carry the ghosts of unresolved torment that has taken place prior to their own birth. This trial reaches its apotheosis in the macabre photo-poem *Y penser sans cesse* (2011), published in French and German in the same volume, in which the Berlin-dwelling narrator notices that her young son has been taken over by the ghost of a Holocaust deportee who once lived in the same building. While this situation is exceptional,¹ it nevertheless serves to illustrate, in especially horrendous fashion, the recurring NDiayean problematic whereby a child is made to serve as the 'container' of the traumatic energy of those who have preceded him or her.

While, in the ideal course of events, parents will 'contain' their children's unmanageable fears, converting them, as Wilfred Bion (1962) proposed, into tolerable feelings to be returned to the child as she journeys towards an authentic emotional experience of herself, in NDiaye's world children are used, illegitimately, as 'containers' by those older than them. Having a child becomes, for NDiaye, a means of getting rid of unpleasant sensations for which one would otherwise

have to take full responsibility. The child serves as a kind of short cut, a way of not having to look properly at oneself. Titi becomes the sickly emblem of Rosie Carpe's inability to work through her own likely childhood experiences of abuse and neglect. In the same way, Stéphane Ventru's unnameable pet in *La Femme changée en bûche* becomes the bestial representative of his disavowed feelings of social marginalization and inadequate masculinity. Both child and pet must pay the price of such effective work of symbolization by their own sacrifice. Like the disabled Bébé of *Papa doit manger*, who must 'disappear' in order for Papa's feelings of racialized inferiority to lessen, all NDiaye's small creatures might be described in Jung's terms as having *never been properly born*.² They have instead been stifled before birth, prevented from developing as individuals in their own right, set on a predestined path of horror-baby, spectral and ghostly from cradle to grave. It is no wonder that in tandem with these hapless child-figures there exist a whole host of 'pre-babies' in NDiaye's fictions and plays, babies that are literally never born. From Lili's magically aborted foetus in *La Sorcière*, to Rosie Carpe's miscarried 'immaculate conception', to Djamila's phantom infant in *Rien d'humain*, there remains the suggestion that to get 'properly' born is no small feat, manageable only in exceptionally fortunate circumstances.

In this chapter, I examine a number of uncategorizable texts by NDiaye. In these texts, all of which refuse the 'adult' framework of novel or theatre, the child figure is prominent. More significantly, though, the text, in some way or another, carves out a potentially new space for that child figure to inhabit. This new space may arise through the unusually 'child-like' form assumed by the text – these are short stories or some kind of picture- or photo-book – or else by the way in which the text addresses itself directly to a child reader. Three of the texts I consider in this chapter were written for non-adult readers. NDiaye's books for children are, in some ways, her most radical and disruptive works, reworking the endlessly depressing scenarios of the plays and longer prose fiction in such a way that their child figures can, at last, find empowering new relationships through which they may get 'properly born'. In some of the texts examined in this chapter, empathic coalitions spring up between similarly animalized child and adult subjects; in others, the parent figures learn – finally! – to perceive the child in their care as a separate being who is nevertheless deserving of love and respect. In almost all of them, the spotlight shone on the parent-child relationship feels slightly gentler than in the novels and

plays. And, if not gentler, the light could perhaps be described as more conducive to the emergence of 'evolved' parental consciousness in the reader. The brevity of the texts, as well as the images deployed in many of them, reinforce an effect of absorbable healing. And when that is not the case – some of the stories of the 2004 collection *Tous mes amis* are horrific – there is instead a Grimm-like quality which conveys the short, sharp shock typical of the finest kind of fairy tale.

The texts I explore in this chapter, all written after 2000, offer something less desperately sad, then, than the novels and the plays. They are more optimistic too than earlier short stories and picture books which NDiaye had tried her hand at. If the tale 'Le Jour du Président' (1997) had placed at its centre a character who embodied more effectively than any other of NDiaye's protagonists the horror of psychic and physical vulnerability, it was not able to offer her any way out of her nightmare. Olga, the teenage anorexic and would-be 'pur esprit', is a child-ghost and nothing-person, captured in NDiaye's text at her gravest stages of disintegration: she fades away in the course of the story to a state of ghoulish evanescence. By the tale's final paragraphs, Olga's head has been drained empty of life and thought, and is instead flooded with sunlight. Believing that she is finally receiving her mother's love, she finds herself gazed upon by the idiotic face of none other than former president Jacques Chirac. Olga is NDiaye's most Flaubertian victim, sacrificed by the author herself, too early for the rescuing raft of later, more-generous texts.

Similarly, the hapless 'femme-poisson' of *La Naufragée* (1999), adrift in a sea-less Paris and a clutch of disorientating Turner paintings, is a minoritarian monster whose fate is similarly sealed by her coming out too soon. Her experience of life is confused, impossible to picture, a synaesthetic mix of indescribable sound, blurred vision and fragmented language which perfectly mimics that of a baby. With her blank, colourless hair, bloodless lips and unfocused, unintelligible gaze, the woman-fish is the ultimate figure of the NDiayan infantile sublime, beyond description, on her last legs (or crutches), and the victim of pitiless adult human violence. How did she get here? The mystery of her arrival on land is akin to that of being born into the world. Both 'mer' and 'mère' are long gone. All she knows is: 'J'arrive quelque part' (N, 25). The woman-fish's world is a terrible dream, silent, violent and confused; her life is 'bare', beyond the law, in a space of permanent exception; and her strategies of survival – immobility, silence, communication, charm – all fail to save her.³

The texts explored in this chapter pursue the theme of child-like helplessness as experienced by Olga and the *femme-poisson*, but reinsert it, for the most part, within a framework in which that helplessness may stand at least some chance of survival. While it is true that the stories of *Tous mes amis* are, for the most part, ghastly, the collection nevertheless concludes on a moment of parent-child redemption – in the tale named ‘Révélation’ – that is unprecedented. Being born, even being orphaned, is, these tales seem to suggest, where all true adventures begin. The narrator of *Autoportrait en vert*, however neurasthenic she may appear, seems, by the end of her strange photographic tale of ghost-chasing, to be emerging into a space in which she may at last be able to perceive her children’s unpalatable visions of truth for what they are. Finally, the adoptive parent-figures of the three books explicitly conceived for children – *La Diablesse et son enfant* (2000), *Les Paradis de Prunelle* (2003) and *Le Souhait* (2005) – all arrive for their endangered charges in the nick of time, saving the little ones from expiry just when it might have appeared that rescue was impossible. As NDiaye once put it, ‘on ne peut pas se plaindre que quelqu’un soit né. Peut-être que le pire, c’est de ne pas naître. Ça me semble impossible de regretter pour quelqu’un qu’il soit né’ (Argand, 2001). In the texts we are about to explore, at least some clues are offered as to how to make the best of that ambiguous gift of birth.

The Living Dolls: *Tous mes amis* (2004)

NDiaye’s only published collection of short stories has not been widely discussed, but it contains some of her funniest, most disturbing and original writing. It may be considered as her own brood of ignored yet magical ‘little ones’. The five stories are horrific fairy tales for grown-ups, all miracles of economical narration, all containing a mesmeric power of suggestion so strange and frightening that NDiaye merits comparison with the masters and mistresses of the genre. If the first three stories (‘Tous mes amis’, ‘La Mort de Claude François’ and ‘Les Garçons’) are shockingly cruel, all of them turning around the themes of children in danger and missing – yet simultaneously abusive – fathers), the final two (‘Une journée de Brulard’ and ‘Révélation’), ugly though they also are, seem to contain the seeds of some kind of redemption: Brulard’s husband Jimmy and the final story’s fantastical son are almost ineffable figures of love and forgiveness, leaving the

reader with the distinct impression that, even if NDiaye's is a world heavily populated by ghosts and ogres, it also has room for at least one or two angels.

'Tous mes amis' is a tale of blank psychosis and escalating class war that culminates in an unspoken act of racialized violence. It is difficult to imagine a starker – or, strangely, more hilarious – snapshot of the psychosocial diseases of contemporary France, all refracted through the self-pitying narration of yet another middle-aged schoolteacher. This Poe-like narrator's increasingly desperate attempts to analyse and invade his white working-class housekeeper and former pupil Séverine, married to Jamel, another former pupil (generally referred to by the narrator as 'le Maghrébin'), drive the housekeeper towards ever more frustrating displays of coldness, contempt and silent superiority. An intriguing cross between the taciturn maid Hilda and her angry sister Corinne, Séverine is a figure of unreadable proletarian resistance who, in one of the most remarkable images of all NDiaye's writing, sheds her skin, snake-like, an organic gauntlet hurled at the feet of her impotent would-be-master (*TMA*, 20). The narrator is the ultimate failed abusive father, furious at his inability to hang onto the putatively smaller creatures (pupils, social inferiors marked by class and 'race', his wife, his actual children) on whom he would like to practise complete control. In keeping with the ultimate perversity of the colonizing bourgeoisie, and following in the footsteps of Mme Lemarchand and her 'mission civilisatrice', he dreams not only of dominating his little ones, but of receiving their eagerly expressed gratitude for the favour he is doing them, boasting of having acquired 'une certaine maîtrise dans la manière de séduire mes élèves. Dans le collège, dans le lycée, s'était établie depuis longtemps ma belle popularité' (*TMA*, 14). He longs to play everybody's favourite Daddy, yet doubts constantly whether he could ever wield enough authority to make people obey his command:

Ils sont maintenant tous trois dans ma maison, docilement conduits par une invitation innocente qu'a lancée et signée ma maison elle-même – c'est ce que, les voyant là, je me figure, ne pouvant imaginer qu'ils soient venus à ma seule demande. Si ma maison intrigue, ne peut-elle intriguer parfois et par hasard dans le sens de mes désirs? (*TMA*, 38)

It is the narrator's ire at being confronted with situations in which his abusive paternal function is categorically rejected that will drive the nasty tale towards its frightening denouement. Constantly confronted with the horrified repulsion of his own children – pupils at the school

where he teaches – feel when they clap eyes on him, he experiences his parental failure as a form of symbolic death: ‘Est-ce que ton père est une charogne? je crie parfois dans son dos’ (*TMA*, 32). As usual with NDiaye, it is unclear as to whether the schism that appears to have taken place within the family has any sexual abuse lurking at its root. Ex-wife and estranged sons treat the narrator with a disgust everybody appears to accept as perfectly reasonable, leaving the reader with vague suspicions that will never be confirmed one way or the other. ‘Tous mes amis’ is a wonderfully complex, teasing narrative, removed from manichaeic pronouncements or black-and-white morality. The narrator is, despite his myriad failings, oddly touching in his alienation and his abject terror of life, his anxious voice conveying a far more vivid, complex and transgressive portrait of rage turned in on itself than the later, better-known tale of Rudy Descas in *Trois femmes puissantes*. If this narrator longs for dutiful children he also longs for a caring mother; if he despises the working classes (especially in their non-white form) he also feels disgust for upper-class ostentatiousness. He is, like all the most successful of NDiaye’s creations, radically ‘in between’, in need of the idealized and aristocratic son-figure Werner to father him, hateful of his dependence on the fantasized strength of others, increasingly experiencing himself as a pathetic, imperceptible non-entity: ‘Mais personne n’entend ni ne prête attention à mon filet de voix. Je ne suis plus nulle part’ (*TMA*, 39). By the story’s closing pages, he is as broken down and worn out a husk of a person as any of NDiaye’s most zombified earlier protagonists: ‘Oh, tout est passé, me dis-je, et tout s’est fait en dehors de moi’ (*TMA*, 43). He has nowhere to go but into a form of neo-Nazism, a position that will become concretized by his invasion of Jamel’s family home, where he waits to commit untold horrors. Racialized contempt, insists NDiaye, more compellingly in this story than almost anywhere else, proceeds ineluctably from the already anxious subject’s tumble into an irretrievable loss of true self.

The second story, ‘La Mort de Claude François’, is as successful as ‘Tous mes amis’ in capturing a disintegrating subjectivity that is ready to sacrifice more vulnerable beings for the sake of hanging onto the dream of validation by a glamorous parent-figure. Zaka will drag her only daughter Paula into the jaws of a nightmare sooner than let go of the possibility of winning her insane former best friend Marlène’s approval: like the narrator of *Autoportrait en vert*, when she takes her young daughter Marie on an ill-advised pilgrimage to see her father (or is it really her former best friend she wants to see?), Zaka is prepared

to overlook her child's safety if it means satisfying her own unmet needs, themselves stuck in traumatized infancy. The entire narrative spins around spectres of sexuality and suffering that refuse to make themselves properly visible. When Marlène initially comes to see Zaka, a doctor, it is so that she can inspect her flesh for marks she claims she ought to have following a physical run-in with her adult son.

Je ne vois rien.

Tu ne vois rien?

Rien du tout, dit-elle, légèrement tremblante.

Tu devrais voir quelque chose [...] Comme il y a quelque chose, tu devrais le voir, docteur Zaka. (*TMA*, 47)

As spectral as the bruises (and indeed the phantom son who is claimed to have caused them) is the eroticized curiosity that hovers on the edges of the scene between the two women: 'Et le docteur Zaka eut le temps d'observer que les seins de Marlène étaient très pâles sous la dentelle rouge et que l'un de ses seins portait quelques petites cicatrices parfaitement circulaires' (*TMA*, 50). The women are linked by something unspeakable – and far more transgressive than mere lesbianism. The narrator's refusal to divulge the nature of this bond pushes the narrative to a place in which the reader feels almost physically stifled by the tantalizing closeness of knowledge which nevertheless refuses to make itself visible. Zaka, close to emotional breakdown, is driven to repeat something with Marlène that is ostensibly linked – as the story's comical yet macabre title makes clear – to the popular French singer Claude François, but that is clearly rooted in something unspeakably traumatic.

Like the wild goose (or swan) chase that was the quest for Léda in *En famille*, the whole Claude François intrigue seems to exist as a rather silly cover story for painful experience that the protagonists cannot bring into language. Why does Zaka's daughter Paula resemble Marlène so intensely? The reader's mind flits uncomfortably, once again, to the possibility of rape – was Zaka impregnated by Marlène's father, just as Djamilia in *Rien d'humain* was impregnated by the father of Bella? The theme of female best friends being linked by the sexual involvement of the father of one of them hovers, after all, over more than a couple of NDiaye texts.⁴ The story's final sequence is as terrifying as it is unreadable. Has Zaka finally lost her mind? Who is the spectral male figure who sweeps young Paula away? Zaka's ex-husband? Marlène's father? The ghost of Claude François? The figure of a missing, menacing father-figure dwells within so much of NDiaye's writing, exuding a

horribly perverse energy. If Marlène and Zaka struggle to find joy or meaning in their lives outside the blank worship of idols, they have been well-versed in organized deadness by their own mothers. Upon Claude François's death, we are told in flashback, a strangely ungraspable mourning seized the entire *banlieue*:

Les mères avaient été longues à quitter la pelouse pour remonter chacune chez elle. Elles s'étaient attardées, vacantes et vides, piétinant l'herbe desséchée dans un sentiment de solitude, d'effondrement et d'incompréhension si puissant que les enfants, mal à l'aise, apeurés, s'étaient éloignés de ce coin jaunâtre, y étaient demeurés en lisière assis sur le trottoir, suivant d'un œil hébété les pieds chaussés de pantoufles ou de savates qui foulaient quelle tombe? quel corps? dans une gigue d'amour désespérée, les fines chevilles pâles, légèrement piquetées, de leurs mères encore jeunes et brutalement méconnaissables. Zaka se rappelait que la mort de Claude François avait enveloppé la cité d'une mélancolie sans issue. (*TMA*, 58)

Along with every missing father, there lurks, as we have come to expect in NDiaye, a 'dead' mother, and this tale is no exception: at bottom it is yet another story about pseudo-fantastical maternal depression.

'Les Garçons', the third tale in the *Tous mes amis* collection, stands up as one of NDiaye's finest achievements. The story of a young boy's identity crisis, precipitated by poverty, his abandoning father and a sense of his own corporeal worthlessness, 'Les Garçons' reads, in some ways, like an obscene homage to *Peter Pan*, J. M. Barrie's tale of fetishized youth reconfigured in terms of child pornography and paedophile tourism. NDiaye's fascination with parents' complicity in the sexualized marketing of their children grows as an increasingly unavoidable theme from *Un temps de saison* onwards. The last pages of *Rosie Carpe* contain the unforgettable image of the second Rose-Marie, a supernaturally glowing, eroticized shape, simultaneously resplendent and debased, by her own pimp-mother, Diane. In 'La Mort de Claude François', Zaka suddenly notes with regret that her daughter Paula 'n'avait pas l'âge d'être habillée comme elle l'avait habillée. Oh oui, elle le savait' (*TMA*, 61). 'Les Garçons' will take the theme of parents consciously or unconsciously prostituting their offspring as far as it can go. Mme Mour, the mother of René's rival, the envied child sex-slave Anthony, reacts to her son's sale with characteristically NDiayean blankness: 'Elle eut un petit rire sec. Elle demanda à René ce qu'il y avait de si terrible dedans' (*TMA*, 97). M. Mour refuses to express an opinion, except by an act of sudden animal-slaughter and subsequent departure.

Both parents manage, in their way, to eradicate all emotional representation of their sacrificed child, the father spelling out the post-Anthony rules of the house very clearly: ‘Vous ne parlez plus de lui. Vous ne prononcez plus son prénom chez moi. Il est mort. Il a disparu. On ne sait plus qui il est, où il est enterré, on ne l’honore pas’ (*TMA*, 88). None of the parents of these boys is available for protection or meaningful response of any kind to their child’s exploitation. As for the grotesque ‘new mother’, the predatory, middle-aged buyer E. Blaye, who carries the lost boys off to the pornographic land inside the computer, she is as robotic and unreal an adoptive parent as can be found in NDiaye’s world: ‘Sa chair semblait être de cire, ses cheveux, de laine. Elle souriait d’un air un peu contraint, sans ouvrir la bouche, tandis qu’Anthony paraissait profiter de toute occasion d’exhiber ses dents plus blanches et plus régulières que ce dont René se souvenait’ (*TMA*, 97). The fact that young Anthony is furthermore entangled in sexual positions with this wax-and-wool mummy completes reinforces the reader’s growing suspicion that, in NDiaye’s world, the ‘dead’ mother, to make matters even worse for her child, is always, consciously or unconsciously, an incestuous one.

René’s one true moment of what we might term ‘aliveness’ comes in the visceral shock he feels at beholding the internet images of the naked Anthony and E. Blaye: ‘René eut l’impression d’avoir reçu un coup de poing en pleine poitrine’ (*TMA*, 96). It is an instant of non-negotiable affect not unlike one that occurs halfway through *En famille* – one of that novel’s most intensely memorable – in which Fanny, having just been on the receiving end of an especially blithe and racialized contempt from an old school-friend’s husband, is suddenly and uncharacteristically sickened by the situation in which she finds herself: ‘Pouah! songea Fanny, écœurée tout d’un coup’ (*EF*, 167). Such moments, in which the abused and increasingly ‘deadened’ child actually *feels* the obscenity of what is being done to him or her, are rare in the work of NDiaye, and they are short-lived. Like Fanny, René will shift back almost immediately to his default stance of alienated envy, conformity and longing, desperate for consecration in the hegemonic order of things: ‘René se mit à rire. Comme il aimait les Mour, tous les quatre, même le frère d’Anthony sans lequel la grâce d’Anthony aurait été moins éminente – comme il aimait, se répétait-il, les bonnes petites familles!’ (*TMA*, 99). And, like Fanny on the day of her interview for the position of cook at Le Coq Hardi, or like the eighteen-year-old NDiaye herself, perhaps, as she set about writing the would-be-dazzling, one-sentence

show-piece that would become *Comédie classique*, René, on the eve of his career in boy-porn, will utter the legendary words, 'Je peux tout faire' (TMA, 100). The rest is a grotesque and terrible free fall, depicted, Flaubert-like, as a synthesis of mental breakdown and erotico-religious ecstasy. René – the 'reborn' – devotes himself body and soul to the project of being swept away by something bigger and stronger than he is. 'Faites que je sois acheté, acheté, acheté' (TMA, 102), he pleads with the Lord, before hallucinating Christ in the pornographic form of Anthony Mour himself. Like Zaka and Marlène, prostrated before the tacky deity of Claude François, like Olga in 'Le Jour du Président', obsessed with salvation by the Chirac whose first name she cannot remember, René is waiting for an idealized Daddy, seeking it in an elusive, normative and sexualized affirmation of his essential self-worth. In the story's spine-chilling final moments, of course, René at last gets what he has unconsciously wished for: for who is the ghostly punter at the steering-wheel, if not his long-lost, pederastic father? Never has NDiaye's sense of irony been more devastating, more obscene.

The collection's final two tales, equally bleak in their way, nevertheless offer the long-suffering reader some crumbs of something resembling hope, although the resemblance might, of course, be a mocking one.⁵ Ève Brulard, the faded filmstar heroine of 'Une journée de Brulard' finds herself, like all the rest, it is true, in a state of near-constant coldness, sinking into psychosis, her subjectivity splitting wildly into guardian and persecutor, dead woman and living: hers is a fundamentally 'false self' gone completely haywire. By the story's end she is, like all the protagonists of this collection of horrific stories, in a state of total despair, her identity completely broken down, her voice evaporated (TMA, 157), her sense of time shrunk to nothing (TMA, 161). And yet her despised husband Jimmy is still there on those final pages, *he* will still care for her, even if nobody else will: Brulard, the frightened, traumatized little girl in an ageing woman's body *is not alone*. It is not clear whether or not the knowledge of that fact will do her any good in the long run – it may simply be too late – but the story's final sentence leaves us in no doubt that Brulard has, at last, been made conscious of being held: 'La dernière pensée tranquille, presque froide qui vint à Brulard fut que jamais personne ne l'avait regardée avec autant de compassion ni d'amitié' (TMA, 166). This vision of being held by someone benevolent – an adoptive (or rediscovered) parent who will not abuse his or her position through exploitation – is NDiaye's ultimate emotional horizon. It is present in the figure of Tante in the final pages of *Quant au riche*

avenir, penned when she was sixteen, and it is there in the final pages of *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, which she wrote when she was forty. All of her stories can be seen, in the final analysis, as variations on the fantasy of the new guardian. Sometimes s/he is monstrous, staring at the petrified child with a pair of ghostly, glass eyes whilst thumping a wooden tail; sometimes she is lascivious or enslaving, packing the child into a car or a crate, and carrying her off to terrible, unknown lands; sometimes, as here, she is simply kind, constant, containing.

The last story, 'Révélation', takes the calming image of an unexpected form of containment to a celestially reassuring new level. Here, the conversation between mother and son may begin as mad and fundamentally 'blank' – no communication appears to be possible – and the scene is certainly one of traumatic, treacherous abandonment. The child, however, stigmatized though he is by the label of mental illness, is 'insensible aux menues humiliations' (*TMA*, 170). And it is through this child's miraculous capacity to contain not only the fact of his own imminent abandonment but also his mother's guilt in abandoning him that he renders the world fantastical and sublime, drawing the eyes of the strangers in the bus towards him not in disgust but in rapt, adoring fascination. There is beauty in strangeness, the boy's calm acceptance of himself, despite everything, seems to suggest. If he does not 'see' himself, or his 'trauma' or his 'stigma', if he revels fantastically in his self-contained blankness, this does not make him mad or self-deceiving – like Fanny, Herman, Nadia, Victoire and the rest – but radiant and almost holy: '[C]ette figure était si belle et si calme parce qu'elle était incapable de percevoir l'attention dont elle était l'objet, et si belle et si calme qu'il fallait maintenant l'enfermer ...' (*TMA*, 173). The failure to perceive is, for this boy, his salvation. This is the fable of a damaged child's psychic survival and self-parenting against the odds. Reminiscent of the story of Khady Demba in its elevation of its central figure's 'cœur simple' to the status of an almost mythical topos, 'Révélation' is, from an aesthetic perspective, far more successful than the prize-winning Khady. One reason for this is its concision: NDiaye here chooses a pleasingly miniature canvas on which to paint this particular idealized wise fool. Even more importantly, though, this story, focused as it is on the compelling relationship between two people – parent and child – at a key moment in their experience of one another, hangs on a killer hook: the fantastical process by which a child, labelled by his parent as impossible and mad, suddenly becomes, for himself, both possible and lucid. He achieves this miracle by a remarkable process of separation,

calmly detaching himself from the mother the moment before she actually abandons him:

Elle lui murmura à l'oreille: je rentrerai sans toi à Corneville.
– Je sais, dit-il. (*TMA*, 174)

The boy of 'Révélation' manages what few of NDiaye's children manage: he prepares for his abandonment with equanimity, with grace. He calmly refuses to internalize his mother's rejecting vibrations, her own madness and damage and confusion. To top it all, he forgives her, Christ-like, even as she betrays him:

Il lui sourit gentiment, pour la rassurer. Il alla jusqu'à lui tapoter le bras, alors elle ne put s'empêcher de lui confier qu'elle aurait aimé que le car ne s'arrête pas, ce que le fils comprenait, lui dit-il parfaitement. Les autres fils qu'elle avait ne l'auraient pas compris du tout, elle y pensa et, déjà, ce fils-là lui manquait. Elle reviendrait seule, tant mieux – comme il lui manquerait! (*TMA*, 174)

Total, triumphant reversal has been achieved. The 'mad' baby forgives his 'sane' mother, exposing her, in a divine act of revelation, as more deluded, needy and 'child-like' than he himself has ever been able to be.

Giving up the Ghost: *Autoportrait en vert* (2005)

The garishly pink-covered 'self-portrait in green', neither novel nor novella, neither autobiography nor *autofiction* in the way it has generally come to be understood, false family photo album and haphazard, lackadaisical joke of a shaggy-dog ghost story, has become one of NDiaye's most intensely analysed texts.⁶ Its disorientating quality – at the levels of genre, narrative, characterization, tone and even medium – seems to have entranced scholars in a way that even the most acclaimed of NDiaye's novels have not. The exciting possibility, aroused by the book's tantalizing title, of perhaps gaining access to NDiaye's enigmatic personal fortress no doubt accounts for at least some of the fascination, as must the collection of bewildering photographs scattered throughout the text. The narrator's hypnotic repetition of her attraction to the ghostly 'femmes en vert' (recalling Lorca's poetic union of greenness, trauma and spectral desire in his 1928 ballad 'Romance somnábulo'), a colour and association both nefarious and irresistible, draws the curious reader in further still. What does this outlandish text and its

strange series of photographs – of blankly staring landscapes, mothers and their infants – *want* from us?

Situated a long way from the usual conventions of novelistic storytelling – the influence of Flaubert on the contemporary French novel notwithstanding – the episodic narrative resembles nothing so much as a series of vaguely psychotic episodes, a sort of Nervalian *Aurélia* (1855) for the twenty-first century. Despite her ghostly frequentations, the narrator's absence of a discernible personality makes even bland earlier protagonists such as Lucie in *La Sorcière* and Rosie Carpe seem positively effervescent. This narrator's 'void-like' tendencies are especially troubling given the reader's desire to identify her, despite multiple reasons for not doing so, with the 'real' Marie NDiaye: like NDiaye at the time of writing, she lives near the banks of the Garonne; like NDiaye, she is a published novelist with an estranged African father; like NDiaye, her husband's name is Jean-Yves.⁷ Doll-like and robotic, she acquiesces with every whim of the various *femmes en vert*, rarely expressing an opinion or a judgement regarding even the most shocking of events, yet at certain moments appears to act quite out of 'character', her attitude suddenly one of utter contempt:

Alors je me mets à sautiller d'un pied sur l'autre en fixant sur Jenny un regard dénué de tendresse. Je demande:

De quoi cet imbécile ne s'est-il pas remis?

[...]

Les lèvres de Jenny tremblotent. Comme elle me semble usée, frappée à mort par les désillusions, les pertes multiples, les convictions ineptes et terrifiantes!

[...]

Une telle absurdité me déplaît profondément. Je ne suis pas loin de détester Jenny, de la trouver bête et médiocre. (AV, 58–9)

Rarely capable of expressing emotion, then, this narrator is simultaneously liable to shift from the most servile veneration (she sits and listens to Jenny's horrendous tales of depression, suicide and haunting in apparently rapt attention, over a period of years) to something resembling hate, with no reason offered for the disturbing lurch in disposition. It is possible that the change in attitude towards Jenny comes precisely because the latter is not, it seems, a *femme en vert*, despite resembling this category of women in her pallid melancholia.

If there is one consistent aspect of the narrator, it is her prioritization, above all things – husband, sisters, children – of the bona fide *femmes en vert*. One way of reading the narrator's need to expose herself

to spectral, maternal, 'green', feminine (non-) presences is by seeing her as somebody who is psychically attached to embodied feelings of emptiness. 'The negative of him is more real than the positive of you', one of Winnicott's patients once told him (Green, 1999), as she tried to explain why she could not give up her attachment to a previous analyst in order to focus on her relationship with Winnicott. NDiaye's narrator, disdaining so much of the living present in favour of the tantalizing *femmes en vert*, appears to act out her attachment to ghostly negativity in a not dissimilar fashion. Like a masochistic version of the dominatrix Mme Lemarchand, the timid narrator seeks destabilizing, quasi-supernatural experiences in other women for two more or less explicitly stated reasons: first, to insist upon her own fundamental *difference* from them (their disappearance, she remarks in panic, would leave her 'dans l'impossibilité de prouver [...] ma propre originalité' (AV, 77); and secondly, to repeat something terrible left over from childhood and encapsulated in the 'inquiétant souvenir d'une femme en vert, au temps de l'école maternelle' (AV, 15), an image that may be either a real memory or a 'screen' one, behind which hides the narrator's own mother. This narrator is also, we should note, the adult daughter of fantastically disengaged parents and the often infantile mother of literally countless children.

In the book's opening pages, the narrator finds herself drawn towards the 'présence verte' of Katia Depetiteville, a presence that is, in the early stages of her acquaintanceship with it, indistinguishable from its environment (AV, 9). It is difficult not to think of the narrator as a newborn, discovering its mother for the first time, irresistibly drawn towards her and the things she can provide, yet unable, for the time being, fully to grasp where she begins and ends. The narrator will later add another key piece of information, reinforcing the idea of Katia Depetiteville (and the women who will follow her) not only as an irresistible mother figure, but specifically as an irresistible mother figure whose face she can reach out and touch with wandering, infantile fingers, but to whom, paradoxically, she can never feel truly close: 'malgré le visage de la femme en vert si proche que je pourrais avancer les doigts et le toucher, quelque chose d'impalpable, un voile, une lueur d'irréalité me rendent réticente à lui livrer qui je suis. Je ne crois pas tout à fait à ce qu'elle est' (AV, 26). The fact that the narrator's actual mother will later 'metamorphose' not only into a full-blown *femme en vert* but into one of 'les plus troublantes, les plus étrangères' (AV, 64) of this strange race (one is reminded of poor Lucie's mother in *La*

Sorcière being an *especially* witchy witch) reinforces the idea of the women in green representing frustratingly un-maternal substitutes for a frustratingly un-maternal mother. This ‘real’ mother is, as the book’s blurb (taken from a truly astonishing passage on page 72) informs us, ‘intouchable, décevante, métamorphosable à l’infini’. She also seems to be wildly unstable (‘ma mère, debout, un pied placé perpendiculairement à l’autre, tente, me semble-t-il, de maîtriser l’effacement et la confusion de son regard’, AV, 69), uninterested (‘pas un mot de mes enfants, de la santé des uns et des autres’, AV, 66) and treacherous in an uncomfortably racialized manner: while it will become clear only later that the narrator is probably not white, her mother has entered into a relationship with a man, Rocco, who ‘à régulièrement contre les Arabes des sorties belliqueuses’ (AV, 69).

The narrator’s Christmas visit to Marseilles to see her mother, Rocco and their mysterious daughter Bella (leaving her own children behind, presumably in the care of their father, though, of course, nothing is mentioned) is a horribly depressing episode, just as her later visit to see her father and his new family in Ouagadougou will be. Both visits bear the stench of an absolutely broken set of affectional bonds (cf. Bowlby, 1989), the adult child interacting with parents whose sense of love or responsibility seems non-existent. More than anything, the parents in this text emerge as *figures that are simultaneously frightened and frightening*. The mother’s eyes flicker nervously with ‘un désarroi dont elle ne se rend pas compte’ (AV, 68), ‘ses yeux roulent follement, cherchant une aide qu’elle ne aurait définir’ (AV, 70), yet she also cuts an alarming figure, sometimes lump-like, and ‘végétative’, her breath ‘si lourd, si masculin’ (AV, 78), at others disquietingly feminine and sexual, as when she grabs the narrator’s gift of a green silk scarf and wraps it ‘bizarrement autour de ses hanches’ (AV, 72). As for the father, he seems hysterically vulnerable and afraid – of what is never made clear – and is sinking into a grave state of anorexia (AV, 89), yet he is also given to fits of rage, during which he throws plates of food out of the window (AV, 87–8). He is, above all, as devoid of love as any of NDiaye’s ‘dead’ mothers, the abiding image of him being one of listless inaccessibility: ‘[U]ne sorte de film blanchâtre sur la cornée rend son regard opaque et vide’ (AV, 85). If the narrator’s attachment (or lack of it) to these distant parental figures is inexplicable and not altogether coherent, such seeming inconsistency gains a great deal of theoretical context when viewed in the light of Hesse and Main’s (1999) important work on ‘disorganized attachment’, a phenomenon arising specifically

in children whose caregivers display this peculiar combination of the frightened and the frightening, and a conceptual framework which could potentially bring a lot in our understanding of almost all the parent–child relationships in NDiaye’s writing.

Ultimately, the one constant theme around which the sprite-like *Autoportrait en vert* might be said to dance is that of parents’ and caregivers’ relationships with the babies, infants and children they watch (or do not watch) over. Many of the photographic images in the book’s second half are of (white) women and (white) infants; the repetition of the same sets of unknown mothers and children in infinitesimally altered arrangements contributes to a mounting, almost subliminal, unease in the reader/viewer. The narrator exudes the same ungraspable anxiety vis-à-vis both the unfamiliarity of her father and mother – they act towards her as if she were a stranger – and the way in which they keep mysteriously changing, without the changes being able to be satisfactorily tracked. It is the father who most resembles the river Garonne – despite the narrator’s insistence on that river’s essentially feminine nature (AV, 8) – in his refusal or inability to contain himself, much less act as a container for the emotions of the brood of miserable children (‘graves, mal à l’aise, maussades [...] tristes, AV, 86–7) who still look to him for a paternal function. Proliferating wives and children (in addition to the narrator and her sisters in France, there are in Ouagadougou ‘trois ou quatre jeunes gens [...] les enfants de mon père [...] tous nés de femmes différentes, dont je ne connais aucune’, AV, 86), the man provides so little in the way of an anchor to those lives he has generated that they appear all, in their different ways, to have gone quite mad from instability. The two sisters in Paris are depressed and on the fringes of society (‘on me parla de la toxicomanie de l’une, de l’alcoolisme de l’autre’, AV, 65), while the half-brother encountered in the father’s restaurant (an eatery mockingly named Ledada) appears to have gone berserk with rage and a sense of abandonment, smashing up the place with a golf club (‘Tiens, il fait du golf, celui-là, me dis-je avec indifférence’, AV, 35), before prostrating himself in front of the uninterested patriarch (‘mon père a l’air absent, las, vidé’, AV, 35). This father, so cold and distant, is at the same time emotionally overwhelming: the narrator worries lest ‘les ennuis de mon père s’accumulent, nous engloutissant tous’ (AV, 35). Like the implacable, flooding river, he offers his panic-stricken, ‘disorganized’ offspring the worst of both worlds.

Rich and complex, upsetting and amusing in equal measure, *Autoportrait en vert* can be considered as a deliberately ‘intermedial’

reflection on what is at stake in a parent's and a child's different claims vis-à-vis their capacity for sight, blindness and differently thwarted perception. Early in her narrative, the narrator tries very hard to draw her children into her experience of unverifiable vision. Stopping outside the house where she has seen the ghost of Katia Depetiteville, she asks them the same question several times: are they quite certain that they can see nobody – or nothing – standing in front of the banana tree? The children would clearly like to please their mother, so they try as hard as they possibly can to see whatever it is she is so clearly seeing: 'Et chacun de mes enfants regarde vers la ferme, et leur attention, leur docilité et leur concentration, ainsi que l'absence de toute arrière-pensée dans leur obéissance, tout cela m'amène au bord des larmes' (AV, 10). They really cannot see anything, however. Katia Depetiteville belongs to the parent-narrator alone. At the end of the narrative, the roles of seeing subject and blind one are reversed, except that they are not: for the narrator merely *pretends* not to see what her children see. The narrator's children are chasing a mysterious 'forme sombre, mouvante, nerveuse' (AV, 93) that has already been sighted in the village. The narrator *has* seen the shape, but she elects to disavow that vision: 'En vérité je n'ai rien vu, rien du tout. De quoi s'agit-il?' (AV, 93). Her lie is transparent; she has already told the children that the thing 'n'a pas de nom dans notre langue' (AV, 93). The children remain silent: the moment marks, perhaps, the beginning of their mother's betrayal of their traumatic experience. Parents, in this disquieting world of half-glimpsed apparitions, deny having seen what their children *know* they have seen; it is a kind of perverse familial inevitability. The narrator's father claims not to have noticed his new wife's 'greenness', but the narrator is certain he is lying:

Il feint d'ignorer les petits tailleurs uniformément vert amande, les collants de coton vert, les chaussures vert bouteille, plates, à lacet. Ou il feint d'estimer que cette prédilection se rapporte au goût de sa femme, sur lequel il ne veut pas avoir d'opinion, et n'est en rien liée à leur mariage ni au fait que la belle-fille de sa femme a été la meilleure amie de celle-là. (AV, 33)

The narrator must bear alone the weight of the horrid, enigmatic signifiers ('femme verte et père squelettique', AV, 33). Unable to interpret them, she will never be left in peace by their recurring intensity. Parents claim sudden blindness when it suits them, then, while at other times claiming a sight that they do not possess, as when the narrator's

father, years later, denies his encroaching blindness. Mostly, though, parent figures simply refuse to see what they do not want to see. The narrator's new stepmother and former best friend, as well as her mother and her friend Jenny all resolutely ignore the narrator's children, as if they are threatened by the very sight or evocation of them. Children and childhood experience attain the status of imponderables, elements of existence which must be banished from sight. Children themselves, meanwhile, are forced by their parents to see what they should not have to see, to soak in adult experience that should not be theirs. The narrator's strangely mature eleven-year-old daughter Marie is obliged to witness the depressing scene of her grandfather's furious, anorexic depression in Ouagadougou, as well as the break-up of his marriage, the misery of his numerous children, and her own mother's chronic discomfort, all the while being ignored by the adults around her: 'Elle comptait, légitimement, sur de l'émotion, de la sensibilité. Voilà qu'elle découvre une incompréhensible paralysie des sentiments, de l'indifférence et du sabotage collectif: la lente agonie d'une maison organisée autour d'un maître dont le goût pour la mort n'est plus dissimulé' (AV, 89).

How will the sight of this collective deathliness affect young Marie in the years to come? How will she articulate it, if she ever rediscovers the experience in affective terms? And will her mother, our narrator, confirm her daughter's feelings, or else deny that any of it ever happened? We shall never know the answers to these questions, of course, but the narrator's bloodless responses to most of the phenomena she describes, as well as her denial of the 'forme sombre', do not bode well for later mother-daughter conversations about *that* trip to Ouagadougou. All these instances of contested vision cast a new perspective on the book's many bewildering photographs, however. Reminiscent, at times, of Edwardian 'fairy photography', and certainly tinged with an unmistakably spectral air – accentuated in the 'double' sets by the slight differences between the two images: now you see it, now you don't – these images convey a sense of the book's attempt to catch on film the haunting elements of personal experience that grown-ups are unable or unwilling to see.⁸

‘Mon petit, c’est la responsabilité de tout adulte’:
The Children’s Books

NDiaye’s three books written for children resemble weird, ultimately happy, but also very frightening dreams. If her adult fiction is nightmarish, these illustrated texts offer at least the glimmer of resolution for the child protagonists. Christiane Connan-Pintado notes the growing place of the troubled child in NDiaye’s texts generally, adding that while the children’s books are no exception to this trend, ‘malgré tout, l’enfant est mieux traité dans les récits pour enfants que dans le reste de l’œuvre, ou il est généralement immolé sur l’autel de l’égoïsme adulte’ (2009: 51). Observing that both NDiaye and the three different publishers aim at children probably too young to appreciate the fact, all three texts revolve around the problems faced by a child struggling to fit into far from ideal community or kinship structures. Connan-Pintado notes that in these tales NDiaye always takes the child’s side. I would add that, crucially, she provides much-needed *solutions* for these children in the terrible social, familial and psychological challenges that face them. Unlike Steve, Titi, Jacky, Mina, Ami and all the other victims of the novels and plays, Prunelle, Camélia and the she-devil’s adopted child do not have to lose their souls. All these temporarily lost or unwanted children finally get found, by (eventually) responsible adults; they are allowed to carry on existing authentically, psychic life intact, as complex, living people.

Connan-Pintado observes that the first of the children’s books, *La Diablesse et son enfant* (2000), tells the same story – give or take a gang-rape and a child possibly eaten by pigs – as the play *Providence* (2001). Dispensing with any reference to the play’s more disturbing events, though, the level of opacity and ellipsis in the prose narrative (duplicated by the artist Nadja’s troubling illustrations) is, Connan-Pintado observes, more intense than it is in the theatrical piece: its multiple ‘child-friendly’ gaps in fact make it troublingly strange. With this story, NDiaye creates a child’s introduction to both trauma (the kindly she-devil’s loss of her child) and stigma (the dreaded goat’s hooves she grows as a result). The way in which she posits the latter as a direct consequence of the former (*DSE*, 23) is both bizarre and illogical, and yet in some ungraspable manner it does work at an emotional level. The connection between the loss and the hooves subtly suggests to the child reader that real or perceived corporeal difference – so long as it results in social ostracism – is difficult to disentangle from the experience of psychic violence. The she-devil is marked out as physically

different not because she essentially *is* different (the processes of racialization being largely fantasmatic), but because her community needs to find some concrete form of representing the otherwise unrepresentable fear of its own destitution.

It is difficult to say how young readers react to the tale (and I myself must confess to not yet having discussed it with any French-speaking children). It is an uncompromising read, even for adults, with NDiaye smuggling in allusions both to Holocaust-era dementia (as the villagers inspect the feet of all the children to make sure that they do not resemble those of the she-devil) and contemporary racism (the she-devil appears to be an immigrant from a hot country, a detail that contributes to her marginalization as much as the loss of her child, her nomadism and her strange feet). The tale's happy ending – a new child for the she-devil and a new mother for the deformed and ejected village-child – ties up every usually unresolved horror in NDiaye's complex knot of psychosocial nightmares. There is an easing of the original trauma: the two ostracized characters are no longer alone since they have found each other. There is an end to the visible manifestation of stigma: the she-devil grows 'normal' feet. And there is the delivery to the abandoned infant of a good-enough mother, one who actually understands her physical difference, since she has experienced such a difference too.¹⁰

Les Paradis de Prunelle (2003) revolves around the troubled interactions of another of NDiaye's brother–sister couples. Like the narrator of *Comédie classique* and his sister Judith, like Lazare Carpe and his sister Rosie, little Odilon must deal with the upsetting experience of watching his sister transform into a half-dead person, somebody who is not quite 'there', and appears to have left their former brother–sister intimacy behind for ever. Like *La Diablesse et son enfant*, it is a conceptually ambitious text – one wonders, once again, what actual children make of it – although it swaps the former's socio-political sophistication for a psychodynamic depth that is altogether overwhelming, as slippery and ethereal as it is hard-hitting. Like Ben Rice's remarkable English-language narrative for children and adults, *Pobby and Dingan* (2000), it is a story that hinges emotionally on a pragmatic, 'down-to-earth' brother being prepared to believe his fanciful sister's otherworldly tales in order to save her from depression and, eventually, death.

Prunelle is a child in limbo, caught between incompatible states of being. Following a stay in hospital, she undergoes an inexplicable affective metamorphosis. Exuding an eerie blankness, it seems to her little brother Odilon as if she has become somehow cut off from her

relationship with him. She no longer seems to hear what he says, and instead stares vacantly into the middle distance, not even registering feeling when he pinches her. Prunelle has, to all intents and purposes, departed from human relationality: 'En bref, Prunelle avait été là sans être vraiment là' (*PP*, 29).¹¹ In Odilon's terms she is 'ensorcelée' (*PP*, 16), though to the adult reader, alert to Prunelle's insistence on the pleasures of the near-dead and dematerialized state to which she has been recently exposed, combined with her 'mélancolie' (*PP*, 21) and her conviction that she must return imminently to the unearthly 'dernier paradis' she has visited (*PP*, 25), the girl sounds alarmingly close to a state of severe depression. Prunelle's miraculous return at the end of the story, 'un peu pâle et amincie, mais bien semblable à sa sœur Prunelle de toujours' (*PP*, 42) is due to the sudden arrival and indefatigable intervention of another 'familiar stranger', the children's mysterious Tante Peggy, an eccentric relative 'qui vivait très loin d'ici, dans un pays dont Odilon avait oublié le nom' (*PP*, 18).

As in so many of NDiaye's texts, the aunt-figure is portrayed as the holder of powers over the child far more powerful than those of its own parents, and in this story the materteral¹² power is, happily, put to good use. Tante Peggy displays an indescribable intelligence vis-à-vis Prunelle's situation, compared to which the children's father and mother ('irrités, mécontents de lui, lui en voulant', *PP*, 36) appear small-minded, impotent and aggressive. Not only does Tante Peggy interact with Odilon in a manner that will be conducive to uncovering Prunelle's deadly truth ('Contrairement aux parents, elle ne se hâtait jamais pour interroger ou contredire, mais laissait tout loisir à sa réflexion de s'imprégner de ce qu'on lui avait dit', *PP*, 37), she follows through on her crucial dialogue with her nephew in a tireless series of visits to Prunelle (once again in hospital, and dangerously close to death). We will never learn exactly how Tante Peggy brings Prunelle back to her former state of aliveness: the process of recovery is, the text appears to imply, beyond the capacities of language. What is certain is that the shift takes place within the quality of interaction, first, between Odilon and his aunt, as he tells her of the strange intelligence he has received from Prunelle, and, secondly, between the aunt and Prunelle, as the former makes fantastical use of that strange, transmitted intelligence in a rapport of true care and intimacy with her endangered niece. A successfully intervening figure such as Tante Peggy is, it seems to me, at once shamanic, therapeutic and neo-parental in her function, not unlike Noget, in his dealings

with Nadia and Ange, in the novel *Mon cœur à l'étroit*. Refusing to leave the side of the protagonist in need, no matter how hostile, these figures are prepared also to journey into dark and unknown depths of that person's soul in order to perform whatever work of revelation, comprehension and connection is necessary to deliver her from her self-imposed dissociation from feeling. Meaningfully intelligent relationality – seemingly impossible to receive, in NDiaye's world, with a parent or lover – is rare, then, but it does occur. And the sibling relationship, while not the most promising of NDiayan relational frameworks, as we have seen on a number of occasions, has the potential for its development. After all, it is Odilon's intelligent attentiveness to Prunelle's attachment to non-life that allows the important dialogues to take place: 'C'est ce que leur tante Peggy aurait fait, Odilon le comprenait maintenant: s'adresser à Prunelle comme s'il habitait la même réalité qu'elle, et non pas affirmer à tort et à travers que ceci ou cela n'existait pas' (PP, 23).

NDiaye's third book for children, *Le Souhait* (2005), is just as uncompromising as *La Diabliesse et son enfant* and *Les Paradis de Prunelle* in its determination – like all the best fairy tales – to take the reader to a place of fear, loss and abandonment before providing a solution, of sorts, for the catastrophe. This tale of an adopted (black) child, overwhelmed by her lonely (white) parents' huge feelings – feelings of love which masquerade as selfless, but which are actually stifling, frightening and invasive – is truly alarming. Little Camélia's emotional solitude (when in contact with her adoptive parents' weirdly disembodied, needy, chattering hearts) transforms into physical isolation and unmanageable guilt when she 'loses' the hearts. There is no tolerable way of living with or without the caregivers, then: the child seems doomed to despair. The parental hearts are impossible to live with, as their love is impossible to internalize in such a way that the child can feel happy and safe. Never do they ask her who she is, or what she would like from them, instead heaping gift after gift on her in such a way that she cannot value or enjoy any of them.

It may seem strange to suggest, as this story for children appears to, that a parent can poison his or her child with the love s/he offers. So much of NDiaye's corpus has focused on the nefarious effects of parental hate, envy or, more commonly, blank indifference on offspring, and yet in *Le Souhait*, as in the play *Les Grandes Personnes* (2011), she starts to aim her critique at forms of seemingly well-meaning devotion that end up being equally harmful. Once again, the lesson of NDiaye's

fiction finds its parallel in contemporary psychoanalytic theory. For, as Michael Eigen points out,

When love poisons, a parent who loves may pour limitless negative energy into the child. This is not necessarily the result of a hidden hatred towards the child. It is more an offshoot of the fact that the child is the spontaneous object of the parents' deepest feelings. The pent-up energies of the parent flow towards the child, an indiscriminate mixture of bad with good. All that is in the parent floods the child. Thus love is mixed with a variety of tendencies, including anxious control, worry, death dread, ambition, self-hate. Parental love is not pure – it is mixed with everything else. (Eigen, 1999: xiv–xv)

The love Camélia's adoptive mother and father offer her is enormous, undeniable, then, but it is also hysterical, unprocessed and so undifferentiated as to be experienced as a sort of swirling blankness. Indeed blankness – mixed with whiteness – is present in this story in a way that is impossible to escape. Camélia lives in a world of omnipresent snow, dazzling and Christmassy, to be sure, but also cold and vaguely alienating. Everything around her is white: the curtains, the bed, her boots, her leather coat, her woollen dress, her silk tights; even Alice Charbin's illustrations exude a strangely washed-out colourlessness, very different from the gorgeous greens, browns and reds of *Les Paradis de Prunelle*. 'Le blanc est ta couleur, Camélia,' the talking hearts tell her. 'Ne l'oublie pas' (*SOU*, 37).

Camélia must take care of two hyper-sensitive hearts, which literally break or bleed if she fails to talk to them in the way they need to hear her:

Camélia, disait le cœur de la mère, dis-moi que tu m'aimes.

Et Camélia obéissait, mais si le ton de sa voix n'était pas tout à fait celui qui convenait, le cœur de sa mère se mettait à saigner ou à se fendre ici ou là.

Camélia, disait le cœur du père, dis-moi que tu ne nous quitteras jamais. (*SOU*, 32)

The child is invaded by her adoptive parents' unchecked needs and desires. The story thus anticipates in 'innocent' form a motif that will be later pornographized in NDiaye's theatre. Just as *La Diablesse et son enfant* looks forward to the sexual horrors of *Providence*, the theme of the 'over-stuffed' child in *Le Souhait* will be disgustingly echoed in *Les Grandes Personnes* by images of a small boy's rape by his teacher's plastic sex device. Like that play's child victim, Karim, little Camélia

knows the way she is being treated is intolerable, but she has no one to corroborate the correctness of her intuition. Her act of self-liberation – removing the parents' hearts from her coat pockets and placing them carefully on the park bench – is a remarkable fairy-tale depiction of a child's decision to let go of feelings that have started to become, in the terminology of the British school of psychoanalysis, 'bad internal objects'.¹³ Unfortunately, as Camélia will discover, it is not so easy to begin to live happy and free of the parental objects that have inevitably become a part of oneself:

Camélia joua, courut, sauta et se roula dans la neige en émettant de grands glissements. Cependant, alors même qu'elle poussa des hurlements de rire, une sorte de gêne semblait la contraindre à exagérer sa joie et son plaisir

Qu'as-tu fait des cœurs de tes parents ? murmurait une petite voix dans son esprit. (*SOU*, 41–2)

Along with her parents' form of loving, Camélia has internalized a particularly cruel, shouting superego – Fairbairn (1954) would call it 'anti-libidinal' – which tortures her for her 'wickedness', and destroys any possibility of pleasure in her new-found independence from the 'poor' parents:

Camélia, tu n'es pas digne de ces cœurs-là, si tendres, si attentifs ... Tu mériterais que le cœur de ta mère et le cœur de ton père se transforment en deux pierres pesantes et bien dures que tu devrais coltiner sans te plaindre. Camélia, ma petite, tu mériterais le pire, murmurait Camélia en trotinant vers le parc. (*SOU*, 47).

The guilt of having abandoned her parents is unbearable. And yet, at the same time, there is a feeling of lightness, of release, competing with the harsh, reproachful voices: 'Il est bien agréable de marcher en n'ayant que son propre cœur à transporter' (*SOU*, 47). It is not possible for Camélia, however, it seems, to enjoy the feeling of independence without the guilt of unforgivable wrongdoing. The parents' abandoned hearts grow cold and Camélia's world becomes hard and icy; like Prunelle, she can no longer feel properly alive: 'Elle n'aimait pas cette sensation de froid s'emparant de tout son corps: elle avait l'impression d'être prise dans une glace encore fine mais qui s'épaississait au fil des mois et l'engourdisait' (*SOU*, 52–3). Even worse than the cold is her fear that one day she will no longer realize how cold she is and that her body was ever warm; following this anxiety, we are told, Camélia 'tomba brusquement dans un sommeil blanc et vide' (*SOU*, 54). Once

again, the adult reader can only tremble before NDiaye's evocation of a form of infantile depression which appears to border on the suicidal. We remember with a shudder the deathly fantasies of young Z and cannot help but feel that, for NDiaye, all roads lead back to this terrible place of childhood loneliness.

The happy ending that awaits Camélia – she wakes up to find ‘de vrais parents au cœur bien caché’, parents who are happy to just take her for a walk! (*SOU*, 55) – is certainly welcome, but it feels tacked-on, to say the least. There is not even a magical aunt or counsellor figure through whom we can explain the sudden transformation of the parents, a metamorphosis not only from the state of disembodied hearts into that of whole people, but also, crucially, from childish invalids who can only love on the condition of being adored to a mature mother and father who can love without reservation, fully, as parents. Like Nadia's miraculously rediscovered parents and her mother's lovely home-cooked meals at the end of *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, it all seems a little improbably optimistic. But at least in the case of this book – conceived, after all, for children! – NDiaye has a very good reason.

Conclusion: A Beam of Intense Blankness (*Prière pour le bon usage* *de Marie NDiaye*)

The feeling that something is missing never, ever leaves you – and it can't, and it shouldn't, because something *is* missing.

That isn't of its nature negative. The missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void. It can be an entry as well as an exit. It is the fossil record, the imprint of another life, and although you can never have that life, your fingers trace the space where it might have been, and your fingers learn a kind of Braille.

Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

NDiaye's blank-riddled surfaces can be used in all kinds of astonishing ways. People bring to their fantasies about these chopped-up tales and yanked-out characters a great deal from their own lived experience, prejudice and, perhaps, trauma. There is no universal reader. The fact that I have a Cornish mother (whose Greek father abandoned her when she was eight), a West African father (whose brother was sacrificially murdered at the age of twelve), and was brought up with my two older sisters in an almost exclusively white, working-class town in the northern provinces of a northern European country cannot help but inform much of what I 'recognize' (interpret, smell, hallucinate) in the work of Marie NDiaye. And yet these are just a handful of the myriad reasons I may consciously or unconsciously believe that I am well-positioned to 'talk to the blanks'. In my experience, all of NDiaye's usually obsessive admirers, no matter how intellectually sophisticated,

tend to speak as if her writing is being directed at them, as if they have been equipped with the gift of sensing what is 'really' going on beneath her enigmatic surface. These readers are variously gendered; they occupy different ages; they live out a range of physical, mental and emotional disabilities and sexual preferences; and they experience the often violent mystery of 'race' inside differently marked bodies. I have watched them, in fascination (and usually in a seminar room), arguing passionately (and often making excellent cases) about the obvious reason for Ange's wound; about the malevolence – or not – of the *femmes en vert*; about whether or not 'Fanny' is 'black' (or 'brown' or 'yellow'), and why such a question could possibly matter.

A reader can never relate 'correctly' to *any* texts, much less to ones which veil themselves in blankness and paradox. We might go further still and say that any sustained engagement with an object – human, textual or otherwise – which is largely defined by its hauntingly absent presence, its fragmentary incompleteness, is doomed to founder on the rocks of the most self-indulgent fantasy. Is there any way, though, that, as consumers of the NDiayean blank, we can avoid the worst excesses of our unchecked projections? It is true that NDiaye creates stories and characters which fail to acknowledge what is most psychically – and often physically – 'real' about themselves. Her fictional and theatrical landscapes present themselves in a disquietingly incomplete fashion, often refusing psychological depth, affective substance or ontological information. Yet it is precisely within these zones of seeming affectlessness, absence and invisibility that I suggest NDiaye's readers and spectators *must* actively insert themselves – even at the risk of delusion – and so begin the challenging process of bearing strange new psychic fruit within a spectral dwelling-space. As Racine puts it in his preface to the wonderfully 'nothing' tragedy that is *Bérénice* (1670), 'Toute l'invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien'.

In the short story 'Les Sœurs' (2008), young Bertini spends years trying to grasp the reality of his cheerful and attractive – yet weirdly impenetrable – schoolmate and neighbour, Victoire. Following Victoire wherever she goes, all in the unstated aim of really getting to know her, Bertini eventually has a miraculous conversation with Victoire in which he falteringly testifies to having 'seen' her suffering. This awkward conversation reveals something psychically *real* slipping momentarily out of Victoire, despite her best efforts to mask it. One would never have predicted that silly little Bertini's powers of analysis would be reliable or accurate. But his determination to remain, at any cost, with Victoire,

in all her frustrating unknowability, ultimately dislodges a presence which – to quote the narrator of *Autoportrait en vert* – ‘n’a pas de nom dans notre langue’ (AV, 93). The revelation of emotional truth – if this is what it is – is confused and fleeting: Victoire, overwhelmed and humiliated by the intimacy of it all, will run from Bertini, never to be seen again. And yet, for the reader, there is a powerful and unforgettable intensity to the story. This intensity is not located in the articulate expression of anyone’s emotional ‘truth’, as such, but emerges instead from Bertini’s clumsy half-revelation of Victoire’s defensive falseness. Victoire’s horrified witnessing of that falseness as it escapes from her – in a movement reminiscent of Nadia’s darting eel-foetus in *Mon cœur à l’étroit* – contains the ultimate image of the NDiayean psyche that grows despite its best efforts not to.

In any given relationship, it may sometimes be the object’s failure to be fully ‘there’ that can generate unprecedented forms of psychic aliveness and sensitivity within the subject, and indeed within the relationship itself. The most miraculous moments of insight and connection for a psychotherapist, for example, may occur when she is able to be receptive to ‘dead’ areas in her client’s blocked discourse. Inserting herself into the other’s zones of blankness, she is able not only to name the blankness *as* blankness, but may also, if she is especially empathic, be able to find some way of dwelling in that blankness in a way that the person who is undergoing the therapy is not yet able to do. With a great deal of patience – and the courage to get things wrong – the therapist’s countertransferenceal sojourn within her client’s gaps may eventually yield a new language with which to describe and understand them.

Sometimes we see this kind of improbable growth in the context of relationships between ‘dead’ parents and their children. In a provocative essay Arnold Modell (1999) speculates on the possibility that a parentally ‘failed’ child may not necessarily become a fragmented, emotionally disinvested or psychotic subject, but may instead turn into someone so acutely aware of the early interactions that were denied her that she is exceptionally well-attuned to what is at stake in relationality. ‘Hypersensitivity to one’s own inner life and to the inner life of others’, declares Modell, ‘is only one such compensatory outcome of a child’s exposure to the dead mother’ (85). Similarly, Winnicott suggests that there may exist for infants who have not been sufficiently ‘mirrored’ by their primary caregiver options other than those of inner death and self-annihilating falseness. Such children may develop a *peculiar kind of vision*:

They may succeed by some other method, and blind infants need to get themselves reflected through other senses than that of sight [...] Naturally there are half-way stages in this scheme of things. Some babies do not quite give up hope and they study the object and do all that is possible to see in the object some meaning that ought to be there if only it could be felt. (Winnicott, 1967b: 151–2)

An intense sense of aliveness potentially arises, then, from the frustrated child who passionately stays long enough with the parent who feels ‘dead’. Equally, something new and mad and real can be born when the half-blind, hallucinating subject stares long enough at the blank, glittering object she thinks she *may* recognize. It is, perhaps, this human potential for generating ‘something out of nothing’ that Keats was describing when he wrote so seductively in a letter of 1817 of the artist’s need of ‘negative capability’:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (Keats, 2010: 276)

NDiaye’s later narratives actively draw the reader’s attention to the potential miracles that can be effected through an improbable lingering in uncertainty, mystery and doubt. In her texts which depict some kind of quasi-cosmic relational ‘breakthrough’ à la Bertini and Victoire, the breakthrough emerges from one character’s rapt attention to another character’s frustratingly zombified quality. In circumstances of thwarted perception, knowledge and feeling, then, it may be the subject’s capacity to adapt to alternative forms of looking and knowing that ultimately generates the most emotionally truthful experience. As Ladvine gazes at the mysterious dog which may or may not have been following her for days, all she can reflect is: ‘C’était possible, c’était probable. Mais, au fond, elle ne savait pas’ (*L*, 221).

The novel *Ladvine* synthesizes every conceivable layer of the emerging NDiayan whispered injunction that protagonists – and readers – go forth into the half-light of blankness, at the heart of which may lie the possibility of something resembling post-blank recognition. Malinka/Clarisse is the ultimate blank centre: swathed in the shame of quintessential NDiayan *blancness* – the racialized version of the desire to

remain colourless – she is the embodiment of the affectively absent daughter, mother, partner and heroine. Following her actual, physical murder, her mother, daughter, ex-husband and the reader are all left with the same unanswerable question: who *was* this woman? And what did she really want? For the daughter, Ladivine II, the internalization of her mother's blankness converts her own insides into a zombie-ridden crypt, populated by secrets and foreclosures which linger, spectral and unsymbolizable. More frustratingly still, the 'original' Ladivine I, secret grandmother, aged cleaning-woman and potential 'keeper of the key', is herself something of a blank-riddled cipher. Cheerful and kindly she may be, but little else is forthcoming in the way of details: Ladivine Sylla masks not only her culture of origin, but also anything resembling a past, a personality, or an unconscious. How exactly have she and her glacial daughter Malinka/Clarisse arrived at the situation described in the early pages of the novel, this once-a-month, tea-and-cake carcass of a secret, shameful relationship? Early trauma? Schoolyard stigma? Failed attachment? Institutional racism? All these putative 'reasons' wither away, flimsy and inadequate, when we grasp at them as totalizing explanations for the blank horror. All are valid hypotheses, yet no single one really resolves anything. The horror, meanwhile, remains.

The reader's only option – and the only option for the younger Ladivine, not even consciously aware that anything is wrong with her family in the first place – is to give up on explanation and instead to go forward into the fantastical zone that is formed at the crossroads of blankness and recognition. The novel presents its protagonists' development within an increasingly intense series of interactions beyond reason. These interactions take place in a dimension that appears to have taken shape 'in dreams', akin to Lynchian theatres of impossible recognition such as the Club Silencio of *Mulholland Drive*, or the Black Lodge of *Twin Peaks*, where a woman approaching her own death may laugh, converse and weep with an avatar of the very stranger/detective/angel who will later lead her murder investigation.¹ When Ladivine II gazes into the eyes of the brown dog, the moment is experienced as one that is simultaneously inexplicable and affirming of her capacity to be emotionally alive. Something resembling soulful connection has taken place, and Ladivine knows that this is what distinguishes her from her dead (in every sense) mother 'Clarisse'. Ladivine's trajectory is thenceforth characterized by an embrace of the quasi-psychotically hyper-relational. Entering into an oneiric dialogue with the person who believes her to be the woman from the wedding, Ladivine spins tales

which are as unsubstantiated as they are weirdly, madly 'true': 'Elle avait pourtant si bien raconté, et avec tant de détails justes, elle voyait si précisément ce qu'elle avait décrit qu'elle en venait presque à douter d'avoir inventé' (*L*, 251). Ladvine accepts and revels in a recognition without logical foundation, and in doing so begins her movement towards a relationality beyond the restrictive codes of identity.

Is this just another way of saying that Ladvine has entered total madness? Perhaps. And, if this is the case, I am loath to posit the development as a positive one, for, unlike some theorists of post-repressive ego-dissolution, I tend to consider the loss of psychic control as more of a handicap than a liberation. It may be that Ladvine II can steer no safe route between the spirit-numbing blankness of her old life and the shape-shifting excess of her new one precisely because she has no access to the halfway space of partial dissolution. She is accordingly 'engloutie' (*L*, 373) by the enchanted forest, overwhelmed by a sudden bursting of the thought-dam that has kept her anchored, if affectively dead, for so many years. But her grandmother, Ladvine Sylla, offers the reader, in the novel's devastating final section, the glimpse of a form of 'mad' recognition that may be potentially more useful as the blueprint for psychic growth. Communing on the morning of her daughter's killer's trial with the various figurines she has accumulated over the years, Ladvine I experiences the inanimate statuettes as improbably empathic:

Elle atteignait alors l'état qu'elle recherchait, mi-conscient, mi hébété, où il lui semblait que les figurines pleuraient pour elle, ayant pris une part de sa peine, la considérant de leur regard soudain animé, mouillé, brillant.

Elle voyait le reflet de ses yeux secs et morts dans leurs prunelles de porcelaine, elle se sentait mieux et lui montaient aux lèvres des phrases de consolation qu'elle adressait dans un murmure à ses pauvres figurines, se retenant tout juste d'essayer leurs joues trempées de larmes. (*L*, 395)

The moment is a genuinely uncanny one, qualities of aliveness and deadness, vulnerability and caregiving now strangely loose and free-flowing amongst Ladvine and the living dolls. And yet this seems to me to be far removed from a description of psychosis. Old Ladvine has instead entered into something resembling Wilfred Bion's description of *reverie*, that half-conscious state into which a mother (or therapist) drifts so as to be able to attend at an unconscious level to the psychic needs of her infant or interlocutor, converting the dependent party's unprocessed and unthinkable non-thoughts ('beta elements') into meaningful emotions. The difference here, of course, is

that Ladivine is caring for herself, using the statuettes as ‘transitional objects’ (cf. Winnicott, 1953) with which she may unlock tearful feelings that would otherwise remain buried and blank. Recognizing the ‘dead’ figurines as alive is, on the one hand, quite mad – and yet, at another level, this act of recognition is a healing one, allowing Ladivine to become the genuinely strong woman who, in the novel’s final pages, will welcome a fantastical dog into her own safe and containing home rather than having to follow it into an uncontrollable, enchanted forest. Unlike her granddaughter Ladivine Rivière, ‘swallowed up’ as she is by her blistering encounter with the all-consuming, unimaginable intensity of ‘the One’, Ladivine Sylla is accorded relational, survivable, ‘angelic’ revelation: she has discovered a negotiable zone between divine and human intelligence.²

The reader’s mad recognition of the NDiayean ‘blank fantastic’ is a double-edged sword: it may swallow him whole, or it may help her to grow and to relate. It all depends on what use s/he makes of it. In my own dealings with NDiaye’s ‘blank dolls’ over the last ten years, I have found that by gradually internalizing them – helplessly and despite myself: it was never a conscious decision – I have been accompanied by uncannily strange and familiar objects whose power I have experienced as truly angelic, in terms of the psychic protection, playful comradeship and manageable enlightenment they have afforded me. These porcelain surfaces and their variously ‘dead’ inhabitants have gradually, over the course of a complex process of mourning, transference, dialogue and imagination, acquired the bright, moist eyes of Ladivine’s dogs and figurines.

In her analysis of the intuitive overlaps between Samuel Beckett and his erstwhile therapist Bion, Angela Moorjani reflects on the possibility of a ‘binocular’ subjectivity, blank and seeing, strangely powerful in its outlandish, one-eyed asymmetry:

Bion concurs that the unknowable can at best be only partially grasped through the mind’s evolving transformations (verbal, musical, artistic, for instance). One could either flood the darkness with ‘brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable light’, Bion suggests, or count on maximum darkness to reveal flickers of the unforeseen. Accordingly, Bion postulates that one seeing eye and one blind eye would be the best approach to problems, using one for observation and the other for intuiting the unforeseen in the dark. (2004: 30)

I propose, by way of conclusion, that the reader of Marie NDiaye learn to exploit precisely this powerful 'two-ness' of vision, keeping one eye wide open, and the other – to borrow a Kubrickian phrase – 'wide shut'. Is this hybrid, half-blind, half-lucid creature not incarnated in the figure of NDiaye herself, as she veers between stances of revolutionary perspicacity and disquieting shortness of sight? Do we not find the same 'binocular' monster in *En famille*'s Fanny, on occasion brilliantly insightful vis-à-vis her unspeakable predicament, while on others so unknowing as to appear idiotic? NDiaye's 'binocular' creatures may inhabit a single body, or they may be split into two physically separate, twin-like entities like Paula (who sees too much, her eyes and ears overwhelmed by hyper-racialized perception) and Victoire (blank, blind, seeing and feeling nothing, or so she claims). But if the reader is to learn to see, to know and to feel NDiaye in an empathic and enlightening manner, s/he needs to transform into something as radically binocular, or even two-headed, as NDiaye's creations themselves are. S/he must be capable of lingering for as long as is necessary in an ambiguous heart of blankness, but s/he must also be ready, when the time comes, to stake that blank heart with colour and recognition and life.

Appendix: Plot Synopses

Novels

Quant au riche avenir (1985)

Young Z is a teenage boy who lives with his aunt (known simply as 'Tante') in a suburb of Paris, having lost his parents when he was very small. Divided into three sections, under the headings 'Girlfriend', 'Tante' and 'School', the third-person narrative explores, in meticulous detail, young Z's relationships with these three entities. Each is fraught with anxiety and endless reflection. The Girlfriend lives in a faraway province, only visiting Paris occasionally, and most of the relationship is conducted by letter. Young Z is frustrated by the amount of time it takes the Girlfriend to respond to his letters and also, when a letter from her does finally arrive, by the relatively bland nature of its contents. When the two of them do meet from time to time in Paris, young Z finds the anticipation of the rendezvous overwhelming, while the actual time they spend together is flat and passes too quickly. Separation is intolerable since young Z finds he has nothing substantial to cling to. Gradually young Z finds himself getting more and more skilled at shutting off his emotions, which seem to bring him nothing but grief. His relationship with Tante is, on the whole, depressing, and young Z experiences the woman as chilly and impenetrable. He spends much of his time trying to work out what the nature of the love they share for one another consists of. Occasional flashes of communion and mutual solidarity suggest that something real exists. At school, young Z is ostracized for being eccentric, although his extreme intelligence gives him a certain pride. He enjoys a brief friendship with another boy, Blériot, but this does not work out owing to young Z's increasingly perverse, mistrustful and contemptuous disposition. He experiences himself as increasingly false and insincere, and is unable to distinguish

real feelings from feigned ones. The sudden death of a popular female classmate leaves him perplexed at the way in which myths of lovability get created in the wake of irretrievable loss. Increasingly depressed by daily existence, young Z runs out of school one day with the intention of effecting some radical separation from his own life, but is prevented from taking whatever action he was going to take by the memory of the good, calm face of Tante.

Comédie classique (1987)

The young narrator relates, in one breathless sentence, a particularly madcap and trying day in his complicated Parisian existence. His bizarre younger sister Judith has asked him to help her kill their mother, whom Judith seems to hate, following the mother's marriage to a boorish boyfriend, Hubert. The children's father died some time in the past. Their cousin Georges is about to arrive in Paris. Events become more and more overwhelming: Judith's pressure increases; Georges arrives at Saint-Lazare station, but has been precipitated into a zombified state by the loss of his suitcase. The narrator's vacuous and unattainable girlfriend Sophie betrays him with his good friend Fausto. Wandering in a state of alternating paranoia and affectless torpor, the narrator (having discovered that he has won the lottery) goes to talk to Judith, who informs him with mild amusement that their cousin Georges has been found burnt to death in the narrator's apartment.

La Femme changée en bûche (1989)

Discovering her husband's infidelity, the twenty-year-old narrator decides to kill their baby in order to punish its father. Aided in this project by the Devil, to whom she has written for advice, and with whom she has already done unspecified business in the past (on behalf of her husband), she subsequently flees to the Devil's abode for protection. Eventually gaining access to the Devil's quarters, located in a shabby hotel in Kalane, she is treated with contempt, lasciviousness and indifference by the secretaries Pesta, Nisa and Edna, and by the talking cat Mécistée. Whilst waiting, increasingly anxious and hungry, in the Devil's drawing room, she is begged by a man hanging onto the window ledge outside to help him inside to safety, but she refuses, citing the Devil's strict rules of entry, letting the man plummet to his death. The constantly metamorphosing Devil himself proves inhospitable, consequently banishing the humiliated and increasingly nebulous narrator. Switching to the third person, the text tells the story of Valérie, the former narrator's abusive

friend, and of her powerful position in a telephone call centre. Valérie's friend and inferior Esmée is getting married to a frail young man named Stéphane Ventru, the owner of an unrecognizable, and deeply shameful, animal, whom his aunt finds a dishonour to their family. Following (through a variety of different narrative voices) the wedding preparations of the couple, Esmée's burlesque infidelities with better-built men (including the original narrator's husband), the bourgeois preoccupations of Stéphane's aunt, and the aunt's wilful destruction of Stéphane's unnameable pet, the text flits back and forth between these events and the increasingly outlandish fortunes of the original narrator, who describes her mysterious transformation into a log, then a pebble, and the eventual recuperation of her original form. After a chance meeting with Valérie and her current boyfriend – the Devil – on their way to Esmée's and Stéphane's wedding in Kalane (where Stéphane's aunt lives), the narrator accepts the Devil's offer to become his fourth secretary.

En famille (1990)

Arriving at her maternal grandmother's house after some time away, eighteen-year-old 'Fanny' (her real name is kept secret) is met with embarrassed non-recognition and barely polite indifference by the various members of her (absent) mother's assembled family. Her mother's sister, her Aunt Colette, is especially unfriendly. Having decided that her awkward positioning outside the family group is somehow linked to the mysterious disappearance of her mother's sister Léda before her birth, Fanny embarks on a voyage with Aunt Colette's son, her cousin, the listless and narcissistic Eugène, to find the unknown aunt, bring her back, and enjoy a second, 'complete' family party in honour of Fanny's birth. Eugène, bored and contemptuous, soon abandons Fanny to return home. Her circular lone quest comprises a number of absurd encounters, each more humiliating than the last: at her wealthy father's home, located in an unbearably hot region of the country, she is treated coolly; her random encounter with another aunt, Clémence, in the village of M., is brief and cursory; her job as a dogsbody in a café in M. is degrading, her colleague Lucette mocking and abusive; a vaguely lustful farmhand leaves her waiting in a barn all night for information regarding a Léda he claims to know: it turns out to be the farm dog; Uncle Georges, a regular café customer, fails to recognize her but molests her in his car instead. Eventually her gentle, young ex-fiancé, (another) Georges, arrives at

Fanny's café; embarrassed her by his non-specified physical similarity to her, she sends him away. Travelling to the capital's suburbs Fanny starts working in a fast food restaurant, where her colleagues, superficially similar to her and young Georges, fail to understand why she does not act like them. She, meanwhile, takes advantage of the job to ask every customer if they know anyone or anything by the name of Léda. Her mother casually drops in to buy some burgers. Young Georges arrives to ask her to marry him, apparently on Aunt Colette's instruction; his mother and sisters make clear their fondness for her, but she is unwilling to join their family. Aunt Colette eventually arrives to explain to her in clear terms that she can never be part of the family because of her wilful paranoia and arrogance. Returning nevertheless to the grandmother's village (the grandmother has just died), Fanny hides in a kennel in the family house, watching her mother and Aunt Colette prepare for Eugène's wedding as her mother slips her scraps of food. On the wedding day she sees not only her father arrive, and be welcomed, but she hears that Léda is there too; jumping out of her hiding place she is torn apart by the family dogs, and her remains are thrown by Aunt Colette on the rubbish heap. Taking over the narration briefly, Aunt Colette comments on her son's wedding, on the negative social and demographic changes that have taken place in the village over the years, and on her discovery in the woods of Fanny, now transformed in such a way that she resembles the family and can be provisionally admitted. The reborn Fanny is taken home. Taking over the narration, Fanny herself relates the consequences of her rebirth and new incarnation. She accepts Georges as Aunt Colette had wished, since he will no longer be confused with her; neither Georges nor his mother notice any change in her, however. Her own mother disowns her, furious at news of the transformation, and interpreting it as an unforgivable transgression. The village remains fairly indifferent, the mayor's secretary refusing to grant Fanny official citizenship since she now has no mother. Georges leaves the village, unable to endure its overt hostility towards him. Fanny leaves to find Aunt Léda again: this time Aunt Colette gives her the address, telling her not to bother coming back without Léda. Shifting back into the third person, the narrative relates how Fanny strangely finds herself back in her father's part of the world. Delighted at the change in her appearance, and insisting on the impossibility of his being her blood relative, the father attempts to take Fanny as his new wife; she escapes. Finding herself back in the village of M. she goes to

stay with Aunt Clémence (who is unconvinced by Fanny's alleged transformation) and her husband. Aunt Clémence tells her the story of Léda, how Léda was the only member of the family to defend the marriage of Fanny's parents, was consequently banished, and might even be Fanny's real mother. Fanny decides to give up on the quest for Léda, since association with this outsider will only hamper her chances of acceptance by the family. She remains unsure, however, about how seriously to take Aunt Colette's order to find Léda. Aunt Clémence suddenly dies, and Aunt Colette and Fanny's mother arrive at M. for the funeral, from which Fanny is excluded. A little girl messenger tells her that Aunt Colette is unwilling to readmit her to the family in light of her parents' complaints about her behaviour: Fanny must get both parents to sign an official pardon. Obtaining signatures from a now indifferent mother, and from the servant of the still besotted father, Fanny sends the little girl several times to Aunt Colette's house with explanatory letters. Each time the child ambassador returns more ill-treated than the last, eventually having boiling water spilt on her, and sections of flesh torn off by Eugène's dog. Aunt Colette finally tells the child that Fanny must forgive herself, at which point Fanny decides to give up on the family once and for all. Aunt Clémence's husband turns her out, and she seeks refuge in the little girl's house, which turns out to be a brothel. Some months later Fanny is accosted by the grandmother's spirit in the form of a tree, a bottle of water, and a tap, and is accused by the spirit of arrogance, paranoia and a fundamental inability to understand the family. She sees her mother and Aunt Colette at Aunt Clémence's grave, but they fail to acknowledge her. The narrative is taken over by an elderly distant cousin, who has been asked by Aunt Colette and Eugène to travel to M. and report what Fanny has become: Eugène, abandoned by his wife, would now like to marry Fanny on condition that she has not changed back to her old form. The cousin finds Fanny changed back as she was before her first death, using her original name, working as a prostitute, and unwilling to fight any longer for acceptance by the family. Eugène, angry, demands that the cousin try her again, and that Fanny transform herself favourably; this time Fanny accepts, despite the cousin's anxiety at her still unacceptable appearance. Aunt Colette narrates the final chapter, which tells of Fanny's arrival at the family home as an almost unrecognizable, nearly dead, shadow-thing. Aunt Colette deposits the shape in the shed and tells Eugène the bad news. Fanny's mother comes to dinner, and talks about the

naive romanticism of her youth, and about her failed marriage to Fanny's father. A few days later, Aunt Colette and Eugène travel to see Fanny's father, in the hope of advancing Eugène's flagging career.

Un temps de saison (1994)

Herman, a Parisian maths teacher, is on summer holiday with his wife Rose and their young son in an unnamed provincial village. Having stayed in the village just one day extra this year (they normally leave on the last day of August), Herman sees the sunny weather change dramatically into ceaseless cold and drizzle; at the same time, his wife and child suddenly disappear. Trying in vain to locate them so that the family can return to the capital, Herman is confronted with the (exclusively blond) villagers' polite indifference and unhelpfulness. The police refuse to co-operate, the mayor is unattainable, and Alfred, the only official who agrees to an interview with Herman, and himself a former Parisian who came to the village some years ago, never to leave, his hair now dyed blond, advises him to accept the situation, to check into a hotel, and to wait and see what happens. Herman spends the next few weeks gradually learning and adapting to the village culture: its rigorous classifications of different types of woman, its obsession with money and social progress, its exclusion of non-conformists, its tacit acceptance of child abuse, its powerful system of surveillance. Constantly watched in his hotel room by a smiling old lady across the way, Herman starts to experience feelings of inner liquefaction. The cold, damp weather continues. Herman starts to feel increasing attraction towards Charlotte, the landlady's resigned and passive daughter, who is rented out to Alfred, and towards Métilde, an ambitious worker in the town hall. The foppish Gilbert (Charlotte's brother and Métilde's lover) wants Herman to play tennis with him and another man, Lemaître, in a town called L., hoping that Herman's being Parisian will impress the influential Lemaître and so help Gilbert advance in his career. Finally gaining an audience with the mayor, Herman is informed by the latter that his wife and child have remained in the village, but in dematerialized spirit form: a not uncommon phenomenon, certain holidaymakers are thus transformed when they, or possibly their partner, so desire to remain in the village that a return to Paris becomes impossible. Alfred's was such a case: his dematerialized wife is Herman's old neighbour, whose form one day wanders into a village meeting but is ignored by everyone including Herman. Some days later, Herman sees Rose and his son in their new form on the

street, and feels guilty at not really wanting them back. Increasingly lustful, he considers renting Charlotte from Alfred, but worries about the expense. Eventually deciding to track down Rose and his child at their new abode above the shoe shop, Herman perceives their intense sadness. Herman goes with Gilbert to L. for the much-discussed tennis match, but feels increasingly liquefied. He runs into Métilde, who has come to save him from melting completely, and also meets, randomly, his anxious parents-in-law, who comment on his dramatic physical transformation. He leaves L. in a taxi with the parents-in-law, heading for the village, but the taxi, driven by a noseless drunk, breaks down amid the terrible storm.

La Sorcière (1996)

Lucie, the narrator, lives in provincial France with her husband Pierrot, an ambitious sales rep, and their young twin daughters Maud and Lise. The daughter of a gifted witch, Lucie herself has only mediocre powers of divination, but feels compelled nonetheless to pass on her heritage to Maud and Lise, who both reveal a great aptitude for magic. Lucie's brutal neighbour Isabelle takes a great interest in the family, often dropping by with her frail and psychologically abused child Steve to spy on the household and to have her fortune told by the deferential Lucie. Pierrot suddenly abandons the household (following the example of a work colleague Monsieur Matin), and flees to his mother's house in Poitiers, having emptied the couple's savings account. Lucie meanwhile decides to try to reunite her own recently divorced parents, travelling to Paris in order to persuade them of their mistake. Her much changed mother has a new partner, Robert, from whom the family witchcraft must be kept secret; the father, youthful, tanned, quite transformed by career success, is no more keen than his ex-wife for a reconciliation, and asks Lucie instead to return the large sum of money he recently gave her, since he is in danger of being sued by his company for fraud. A mysterious crow, which reminds Lucie of Isabelle, keeps suddenly appearing. Before leaving Paris, Lucie and the girls randomly meet Isabelle, who has deposited Steve in an institution there. Lucie and the girls now head for Poitiers, Lucie concerned not with saving her marriage but rather with recuperating the money Pierrot has taken, hoping to please her father and thus increase the chances of the latter agreeing to a reconciliatory weekend away with the mother. At her mother-in-law's home in Poitiers, Lucie discovers that Pierrot has fled with the money, and that Pierrot's glamorous,

confident, radically transformed sister Lili is pregnant, by an unknown father. Lili, Maud and Lise go out for the night, but when they return, Lili has mysteriously miscarried. Lucie's mother arrives to warn Lucie of the folly of the reconciliation project, but Lucie refuses to listen. On the way home, Maud and Lise suddenly metamorphose into crows and fly away, leaving Lucie alone for good. Lucie pursues Pierrot to Bourges, where she discovers his new life with a new wife and children, before he sharply dismisses her, still empty-handed. On the road, she encounters a much-altered, blonde, powerful Isabelle, who now owns an exclusive boarding-school for girls training in mysticism, and who offers Lucie a teaching post there, demanding that she devote her entire existence to the new 'family'. Finding the full-time deployment of her already weak powers of witchcraft excessively draining, Lucie discovers that it is easier to bluff her way through lessons, since this is what Isabelle expects of her staff in any case. One day Robert arrives and presents her with a snail, claiming that it is her transformed father, punished by her angry mother for the immorality of his new life. Lucie takes charge of the snail, but is soon arrested under charges of fraudulent teaching. Whilst briefly in prison, where she is insulted and abused by a policeman for being a witch, she loses the snail. Alone, and consumed by feelings of guilt, she runs into Pierrot, his new wife and children, and his mother, who explains Lili's descent into madness, before asking Lucie if she has any holiday plans.

Rosie Carpe (2001)

Rose-Marie ('Rosie') Carpe, a young white woman from the French provincial town of Brive-la-Gaillarde, arrives in Guadeloupe with her small, sickly son Etienne ('Titi'), in the hope of joining her older brother Lazare who has been living on the Caribbean island for five years. Rosie is pregnant, but claims that the conception has taken place outside her presence, at the hands of an unknown entity. Met at the airport by an unknown, light-skinned Guadeloupian man, Rosie is worried that Lazare has been somehow transformed since he has been away, but the stranger turns out to be Lagrand, Lazare's friend and former colleague. Lagrand drives Rosie and Titi to meet Anita, the schoolgirl mother of Lazare's little girl Jade, before depositing all four at Lazare's house, even though Lazare himself is away on business. An extended flashback tells of Rosie and Lazare's upbringing in Brive. Whilst Lazare remembers only the splendour of the white magnolia in the family garden, Rosie dimly remembers a childhood of stifling 'yellowness'. The flashback

continues: moving to Paris for their university studies, both Rosie and Lazare fail their exams, whereupon their parents lose the little interest they had in them. Rosie starts working in a hotel in the suburb of Antony; Lazare disappears. At the hotel, Rosie is seduced by the blond deputy manager Max. Max persuades Rosie to allow their sexual acts to be filmed by a middle-aged woman director; over the course of several recordings, Rosie becomes pregnant with Titi. Max, already married, arranges for a new flat for Rosie, where she lives alone with the baby Titi. A transformed Lazare, thin, hungry and destitute after a year alone in Paris, makes a brief reappearance in Rosie's life, and asks her for money, before invading the home of Max and his wife, where he stays for some time, eventually leaving, without a word, for Brive-la-Gaillarde, with Max's clothes and some money. One day on the streets of Antony, Rosie runs into her mother, quite transformed – blonde, tanned, incredibly youthful, smelling strongly of boxwood – and living with M. Carpe and Lazare in a blindingly white house in Antony. Some time later, Lazare and his friend Abel visit Rosie and Titi. Lazare announces his plan of moving to Guadeloupe with Abel to market sex apparatus, and asks Rosie for money. Lazare, Abel, and M. and Mme Carpe all move to Guadeloupe to start a new life, leaving Rosie alone in Antony with Titi. Rosie gradually drifts into an alcoholic depression, increasingly uncertain about who she actually is. One day, a Guadeloupian hotel guest named Marcus Calmette asks her out for a drink, but she refuses, overcome by fear of Max and the Carpes. Deeply ashamed of this fear and its consequences, Rosie associates her refusal of Calmette with the huge failure that is her existence. Max remarries, and invites Rosie and Titi to the wedding; in an inebriated abyss of humiliation Rosie loses all consciousness and becomes mysteriously pregnant. At the end of her tether, Rosie asks everyone she meets who the baby's father might be, but is met only with disgust; Titi, for whom Rosie feels a mounting hatred, may have witnessed something, but she cannot be sure. Sick of her life, Rosie decides that she and Titi must leave for Guadeloupe. Back in the present, Lagrand drives to pick up Rosie and Lazare's parents from their holiday flat. On the way he reflects on Rosie's strangely negligent treatment of Titi and on his own inexplicable repugnance for the child; before arriving at his destination he is sexually molested by an old white woman tourist. The Carpes are in a new domestic arrangement: Mme Carpe, having changed her name from Danielle to Diane, is pregnant by her lover Alex Foret; M. Carpe has become the partner of Foret's mixed-race daughter

Lisbeth. Monsieur Carpe and Lisbeth will be godparents to the new baby. Diane explains that she is at the start of a truly new life that has nothing to do with her old children. Lagrand reflects on his own mother's sudden and inexplicable rejection of him when he was a child, and her descent into madness, and realizes that he loves Rosie. Increasingly tired, anxious, guilty and fragile, Lagrand drives the Carpes to Lazare's house, where Rosie, Titi, Anita and Jade (but still not Lazare) are staying. Lagrand feels suddenly scared of Rosie, who appears radically altered: more beautiful, powerful and aggressive, she has left the feverish Titi to lie unattended out in the blazing sun. Lagrand becomes convinced that everybody wants Titi to die. Leaving the family, he goes looking for Lazare, whom he increasingly believes to be the human avatar of his old mother's yellow stray dog. In a local restaurant, Lazare, suddenly gone bald, tells Lagrand the terrible story of the business trip with Abel, from which he has just returned. Lagrand returns alone to Lazare's house, where he finds Lisbeth and an abandoned, sicker Titi, lying in the garden surrounded by rats. Rosie, Anita and Jade have gone to the cinema to see the new Asterix film. Seizing Titi, Lagrand drives to the hospital, on the way considering the story Lazare has just told him: Lazare and Abel went hitchhiking in the countryside, picked up by an elderly French tourist couple, and Abel killed the man with a machete, claiming that Lazare had already stifled him to death. The old woman, who reminded Lazare of his mother as she should have been, escaped. Feeling as guiltily implicated in Lazare's crime as in Rosie's abandonment of Titi, Lagrand arrives at the hospital, where he deposits Titi as his own son, and explains to the nurse that Titi has eaten unwashed guavas soaked in rat urine. Leaving Titi in the emergency unit, Lagrand makes his way to the psychiatric wing, where his mother has been incarcerated for the past twenty years. He goes to visit her in the television room, but she fails to recognize him, eventually sending him away in a cloud of humiliation. Lagrand wets his trousers in despair. Meanwhile, Rosie, Anita and Jade have left the cinema, where a distraught Lazare comes looking for them. Rosie, feeling increasingly radiant and powerful, and having determined to cut all ties with her parents and with the (hopefully dead) 'lamb' Titi, considers Lazare with contempt. All four get a taxi to Lagrand's house, where Rosie makes a phone call to Marcus Calmette, telling him that her son is dead, that she loves Calmette, and requesting a meeting. Lagrand's lover Renée watches her in fear and loathing. Lagrand arrives and contemplates Rosie with repulsion, though Rosie feels he is mistaken in

his perception. Lazare relates to a white policeman interrogator how he and Rosie stole Lagrand's Toyota, and drove off, she in search of Calmette, whom she insists is the unborn baby's father, he in search of the old woman tourist whose husband Abel killed. Rosie has a miscarriage, and Lazare watches her in repulsion. Seventeen years later, Lagrand runs into Titi at a demonstration. Titi is now a maths teacher, still living in Guadeloupe. Lagrand is in a bland and guilt-ridden marriage with Renée. Driving Lagrand to his lovely home, Titi relates how he was brought up by his grandparents the Carpes and their respective partners, the father and daughter Alex and Lisbeth; when his grandfather died Diane Carpe instructed him to marry Lisbeth, which he did. They have several children together. As Lagrand wanders around their house, he meets Rosie, who has put on a lot of weight and gone totally grey, skin as well as hair. Rosie tells Lagrand that Titi worships her despite everything she did in the past, but also how he forbids her to go out, and prevents anyone from touching or going near her. Lagrand tells Rosie how he visited Lazare in prison every week, until his release, whereupon Lazare went back to Brive-la-Gaillarde with Jade. A young, blonde, resplendent figure arrives, who turns out to be the second Rose-Marie Carpe, the teenage daughter of Diane Carpe and Alex Foret. Lagrand asks Rosie to come away with him, which she does, to Titi's chagrin. Lagrand, having suffered from a lack of love or family, feels happy to be with Rosie, despite her extreme passivity and indifference, and strange claim to have lost her baby from a punch administered by Marcus Calmette. He drives over to Diane Carpe and Alex Foret's house, where he is warmly welcomed, but gently mocked for having chosen to marry Rosie rather than the incomparably better Rose-Marie. Diane dismisses her son Lazare as a total failure. A fat old man arrives, and gives Diane some money in exchange for time with young Rose-Marie. Lagrand dines with his new parents-in-law.

Mon cœur à l'étroit (2007)

The narrator, Nadia, a middle-aged primary school teacher who lives in a well-to-do area of central Bordeaux, finds that she and her husband Ange, a teacher at the same school as her, have suddenly become the targets of a widespread and inexplicable campaign of fear and hatred. Their pupils run away from them, their colleagues avoid them, and a complete stranger spits in Nadia's face. They try to ignore whatever is going on and to carry on as normal, but one day as they are returning home from school Ange is attacked. He turns out to have a horrendous

wound, just above his liver. Nadia is caught between wanting to care for Ange and a terrible fear of acknowledging how bad things have become. A elderly neighbour, Richard Victor Noget, arrives to offer his support, which Nadia tries her best to refuse, finding the eccentric Noget abject and repellent, but he insists, insinuating himself into the couple's home, where he prepares delicious, buttery dishes and freshly baked bread on a daily basis. Returning to school, Nadia finds the harassment to have calmed somewhat, only to discover, as she returns home, that her coat has been lined with the pieces of Ange's flesh that were cut from his body during the attack the previous day. Life at home grows more bizarre and isolated with every passing day. Ange grows thinner and thinner; Noget's power over him grows stronger and stronger; Ange's grown-up daughters Gladys and Priscilla refuse to have anything more to do with their father and Nadia. Nadia decides she must leave: she will go and stay with her own estranged son Ralph, who lives on a distant island with his wife Yasmine and baby daughter Souhar, a name Nadia finds repugnant. Nadia visits the police station, hoping to have her identity card renewed by Inspector Lanton, Ralph's former boyfriend. She notices that the police station is full of people in whom she recognizes a certain similarity to herself, including her former husband, whom she considers to be a failure, but for whom she still feels pity. Lanton is delighted to see Nadia, and asks her to deliver a letter to Ralph, with whom he is still in love, warning her that if he does not receive a response he will not arrange the renewal of her card or that of her ex-husband, whom, in any case, he hates. Nadia has a number of disquieting experiences in Bordeaux. The streets appear to grow and shrink, swallowing her up, as she becomes increasingly disorientated. The already thick fog grows thicker. Nadia herself is growing fatter and fatter, gorging daily as she is on the rich food prepared by Noget. She receives a long letter from Ralph, who is aware of her plans to visit him, even though she has told him nothing. He accuses her of failing his father, of trying to seduce Lanton, and of numerous other hateful behaviours, all the while claiming that, as a 'new man', now partnered with a certain Wilma, he is capable of forgiveness. Furious at the letter, Nadia finds herself at her ex-husband's house, and remembers her betrayal of him when she began her affair with Ange; she remembers Ralph as a child and teenager, as well as flashes of his sexual relationship with Lanton. She talks at length with her ex-husband, before discovering that he is living off the earnings of their old schoolfriend Corinna Daoui, a woman Nadia despises, who is using

the spare room to do sex work. Nadia leaves Bordeaux at last, bidding the now unrecognizable (and hostile) Ange farewell, but promising that she will send for him. Noget sends her on her way. Although the trams refuse to stop for her, Nadia eventually catches the train for Toulon, where she sits opposite a young woman, Nathalie, who tells her a sad story that she instantly forgets. The train stops at Marseilles and refuses to continue until Nadia gets off, so Nathalie hires a car and drives them both to Toulon, although she appears to transform briefly into a living skeleton during the journey. On the ferry, Nadia distances herself from Nathalie, whom she increasingly experiences as irritating, and eats at the captain's table, drinking in the surprising acceptance she gets from him and his other first-class guests. Returning to her cabin, she finds a middle-aged cleaning lady weeping: Nathalie has told her the story she told Nadia but which Nadia forgot: she has lost her husband and daughter in a fire, and her only surviving child, a boy, is badly burned in a hospital on the island they are heading towards. Nadia feels guilty for her failure to listen to Nathalie, and tries to comfort the weeping cleaning lady. Arriving at the port of C., Nadia knocks into in a breathtakingly handsome man in khaki shorts: it is Ralph, who drives her to the secluded mountain abode he now shares with Wilma, an older woman, and their dog Arno. There is no sign of baby Souhar. Wilma and Ralph appear to eat nothing but meat; keen on hunting, they have masks and heads a-plenty on display. Wilma, a gynaecologist, examines the now huge-bellied Nadia, and is unable to say what she sees inside her, implying that it is a diabolical foetus. Nadia and Ralph bicker constantly, the man's hatred for his mother barely masked. He refuses to contemplate obeying Lanton's epistolary request that he return to that relationship in Bordeaux, and accuses Nadia of being responsible for Ange's downfall. Nadia accompanies Ralph to the hospital where he works as a doctor, discovering that he is treating the burned child of Nathalie, before whom Nadia prostrates. Wandering alone in the streets near the hospital, she discovers her own long-estranged mother singing lullabies to a baby in a house, but is unable to believe that it could really be her. She wanders into a bar, where she urinates and defecates helplessly. Later, Ralph admits that his grandparents do indeed live in a house nearby, where they are bringing up baby Souhar. Nadia pleads with him to respond to Lanton's letter. Nadia goes for an interview at a local school, but is told she is unsuitable to teach as she cannot speak the local language, even though she suspects that this is a language she once knew but has forgotten. She discovers that Noget is due to

give a lecture at the school, and that Noget is, in fact, an extremely famous philosopher of pedagogy, whose articles Ange has plagiarized. Nadia telephones her old house in Bordeaux, and speaks to Noget, who appears to be holding a party at which both Corinna Daoui and Nadia's ex-husband are present. Nadia finds hundreds of bones in Ralph's and Wilma's backyard. Nadia's contractions become more and more painful, and her memories of treating certain pupils badly – those who most resembled her – more and more insistent. At last, Nadia returns to the little house near the hospital, and is reunited with her old parents, who introduce her to her granddaughter Souhar, explaining that Wilma has 'taken' the child's mother Yasmine, and that the meat prepared in that house must not be eaten. Nadia meets Noget after the lecture at the local school, and he explains that Ange is fully recovered and is now in a relationship with Corinna Daoui. Meanwhile, Ralph informs Nadia that his father, her ex-husband, is dead, and that Lanton is responsible. Nadia calls Lanton, who seems to confirm that this is the case. Whilst staying at her parents' house, Nadia gives birth to a darting, black creature, which runs away, leaving only a trace of blood on the floor, which Nadia quickly wipes up. Pushing baby Souhar along the beach in her pram one day, she runs into a youthful-looking Ange, who frolics with Corinna Daoui. After a polite conversation, Nadia bids them farewell, and sings an ambiguous lullaby to her granddaughter.

Trois femmes puissantes (2009)

Norah, a French lawyer of part-French, part-Senegalese parentage, arrives reluctantly at her estranged father's house in Dakar, where she has been summoned in the wake of some unknown emergency. She finds her once-powerful father relatively impoverished, though he has a servant, Masseck, a young maid, Khady Demba, and, surprisingly, two little daughters, whose mother is nowhere to be seen. Norah has left her own young daughter Lucie in France, in the care of her vaguely unreliable German partner Jakob, who also has a child, Grete, from a previous marriage. Norah's father is as cold and perturbing as ever, but eventually tells her why he has asked her to come: she must try to advocate on behalf of her younger brother Sony, who has been arrested for the murder of his father's young wife, and now languishes in a Dakar jail. Norah remembers traumatic events from her and her siblings' childhood: following their parents' separation, their father kidnapped Sony, then a boy of five, taking him to Senegal for good, but leaving Norah and her sister in the care of their French mother. Norah's

mother entered a deep depression from which she never recovered, becoming a prostitute, before marrying for a second time. Sony himself was destroyed by his separation from his mother and two older sisters, excelling in his studies, but becoming emotionally disconnected and impenetrable. Norah visits Sony in prison, where he cries only one word, the name of their other sister, herself now also an adult ruin. Norah, overwhelmed, spontaneously urinates. On her way back to their father's house, Norah runs into her partner Jakob and the two little girls Lucie and Grete: they have come to Dakar to surprise her. They all return to Norah's father's house together where, after dinner, Norah's father insists that some years earlier Norah had lived in Senegal, eventually producing a photograph showing somebody who looks uncannily like Norah in front of a house in Grand-Yoff. Norah visits Sony in prison again, where he tells her that it was not he but their father who strangled their stepmother. The young wife was killed because she and Sony were in love. Norah resolves to save her brother and in so doing to confront the demon that has blighted their lives since childhood. At the dinner-table, her father continues to torment Norah with the story of her alleged stay in Senegal; Norah wets herself once again. That night, she confronts her father with Sony's version of the murder. The father does not deny his guilt. Norah devotes herself to the case now, allowing Lucie to return to France with Jakob and Grete, resigned to the fact that she will not leave Dakar until she has saved Sony. Her father, who transforms nightly into a bird, feels Norah's bird-presence in his tree.

Rudy Descas, from whose point of view the narrative is related, is a white Frenchman in his middle age, married to the Senegalese Fanta, with whom he has a young son, Djibril. Rudy is bitter, dissatisfied and permanently anxious: a vendor of fitted kitchens, he is employed by the smooth and virile Manille, who once had sex with Fanta, and may even still be having an affair with her. Rudy and Fanta had been happier some years ago, when they lived in Dakar and both were high school teachers of French literature. They left their life there when Rudy was dismissed, following a fight with one of his pupils, who had insulted him for being the son of a killer, an accusation which is in fact true. In the course of a stressful afternoon spent driving around provincial Aquitaine, Rudy worries about the argument he has just had with Fanta (the racialized details of which he remembers but dimly); tries to remember terrible events from the past (did he really witness his father's crime?); insults his old neighbour Mme Pulmaire on the telephone; feels haunted by the presence of his depressed, interfering, angel-obsessed mother; is

tormented by a horribly itching anus; is visited on a number of occasions by a mysterious buzzard; and fears lest he has been abandoned by Fanta and Djibril. Both his wife and his son seem silent and impenetrable in his presence, making him increasingly paranoid. Rudy contemplates killing Gauquelan, a local sculptor who has designed a statue that Rudy is convinced is modelled on him, but decides against it, going instead to pick up Djibril from school. Rudy drives to his mother's house, where he is going to leave Djibril, but thinks better of it, having found her in the middle of drawing a young, blond neighbour boy, whom she thinks is an angel. Rudy and Djibril drive home to Fanta and, despite running over a buzzard on the way, Rudy feels happy. The neighbour, Mme Pulmaire, observes Fanta looking happy for the first time, and the two women greet each other, also for the first time.

When Khady Demba's gentle husband dies, leaving her childless, she moves in with his unfriendly family, who make it clear to her that she is nothing but a burden. They tell her she is to leave the country and to travel to France, where a distant cousin, Fanta, is apparently making a good living. Khady sets off with a strange man, who forces her to walk a long distance, before bundling her into a car. During the journey, Khady notices a number of ravens, which she conflates with the children she has never had. Khady has no idea where she is going, but carries on regardless. She gets into a boat, then jumps out of it, running for the beach. Waking up on the sand, she meets a young man, Lamine, who is kind and takes care of her wound. Khady and Lamine decide to head to Europe together, as a couple. They travel some distance in a lorry, but are soon captured. Khady is forced to prostitute her body in order to pay the woman who is putting them up. She keeps herself going by repeating her own name to herself and by reminding herself that she and Lamine can travel to Europe with the money she is saving. Lamine steals all the money, however, leaving Khady alone and penniless. Her body is ravaged from hunger, fatigue and sexual violence. Khady joins a group of people who are aiming to climb over the wall separating them from Europe via ladders that they are building. Khady's physical state gets worse and worse, but her sense of self seems as solid as ever. Khady falls from her ladder. As she dies, she sees a bird flying high, and thinks that she and the bird are one. Lamine, now living and working as an 'illegal immigrant' in France, often thinks about the girl he betrayed in Africa. He hopes that she has forgiven him.

Ladivine (2013)

Clarisse Rivière takes the train to Bordeaux once a month to visit her mother, Ladivine Sylla. Despite the fact that she has a husband and daughter with whom she lives in a nearby town, Clarisse has never revealed this fact to her mother, to whom she tells nothing of her life. The atmosphere between the two women on these visits is strained, Clarisse's blank refusal to share the bare facts of her existence with her mother experienced by the latter as an insult, although no confrontation ever ensues. The reader is told in flashbacks of Clarisse's foggily remembered childhood with Ladivine somewhere near Paris: back then, Clarisse was called Malinka. Malinka and Ladivine live an isolated existence. Ladivine, a cleaning-woman apparently without family, originates from somewhere unstated and far away. Malinka grows up aware only that her father was someone allegedly handsome and important, with chestnut-coloured hair, who will come back for them one day. She begins to despise her mother, to whom she secretly refers as 'la servante', eventually denying any connection with her when people ask: it has become apparent that she bears no mark by which her blood-ties to Ladivine may be guessed. Malinka leaves school when she begins to fail, and takes the train to Bordeaux, where she begins a new life, not informing her mother where she has gone. Changing her name to Clarisse, she begins work as a waitress, but is eventually surprised by the arrival of Ladivine, who has tracked her down and now herself lives in Bordeaux. Despite the pleasure of the brief reunion, Clarisse resolves to break all official ties with her mother, a decision which is ratified when she meets and quickly marries the handsome Richard Rivière, a young car dealer from Toulouse, who believes that his new wife is an orphan without family. Richard and Clarisse move to Langon and have a child, whom Clarisse names Ladivine. One day Richard's father's dog inexplicably runs towards the infant Ladivine, seeming to want to commune with her. Whilst Richard is frightened and furious, Clarisse feels calm, thinking she recognizes her mother's eyes in those of the dog. Clarisse continues to visit her mother Ladivine once a month, saying nothing to her husband or daughter. The years pass by, and Clarisse's blankness remains as steadfast as ever. Eventually, after twenty-five years of marriage, Richard leaves Clarisse, perhaps for another woman, and moves to start a new life in Annecy. She is crushed and humiliated, letting her appearance slide and her self-esteem crash. Her only contact with Richard comes via her attendance at the funeral of Richard's father (who, following a heart attack, has apparently been

half-eaten by his own dog). Some time later, Clarisse meets Freddy Moliger, a much younger man, with whom she begins a sexual relationship. Finding that she has no fear of judgement with Freddy Moliger – the eccentric survivor of a horrific childhood of abuse and neglect – Clarisse tells him her real name and introduces him to her mother. Freddy seems indifferent to whatever stigma Clarisse thinks she bears, and is, in any case, uninterested in her past. But he reacts furiously to the contempt he senses emanating towards him from Clarisse's daughter, young Ladvine, who now lives in Berlin with her husband and two children. Shortly after a visit to Langon from Ladvine II, Freddy, humiliated and enraged at not being told of Clarisse's birthday, stabs Clarisse to death. Clarisse, lost to another dimension, feels herself floating into a deep forest. Her mother Ladvine Sylla learns of Malinka/Clarisse's death when she sees her photograph in a local newspaper. Some time after learning of the death of her mother, Ladvine Rivière is on vacation in an unnamed, faraway, southern country with her German husband Marko and their two young children Annika and Daniel. They have decided to go somewhere different this year, having grown tired of their habitual visits to Marko's parents in Lüneburg and the campsite in Warnemünde where they tend to lapse into alcoholic oblivion. Marko's parents have written him a long, cold letter expressing their disapproval at his decision and their dislike of his 'false' attitude in general. Marko experiences the letter as the end of his relationship with his parents. Having spent a long time researching possible holiday destinations on the internet, Marko and Ladvine take Ladvine's father Richard's advice to visit this faraway country in which they now find themselves. The trip is increasingly nightmarish. The hotel is poorly equipped and unbearably hot; the children are discontented and peevish. The trial of Freddy Moliger is scheduled to take place soon, and the thought of this weighs heavily on Ladvine's mind, which also turns back, at length, to her alternately hostile and guilt-ridden feelings towards her parents, her last birthday gift to her mother, her teenage years in Langon as a sort of high-class call-girl (the fact of which was apparently tolerated by both father and mother), her occasionally lascivious solitude in Berlin and her alienated working life as a French teacher. Back in the present, Ladvine and her family become increasingly disconnected. The children make strange, grimacing expressions, and Marko is oddly nervous. Ladvine is convinced, however, that she is being personally watched over by a benevolent brown dog. The family discover their clothes, lost at the airport along with their luggage, spread

out for sale at a market stall. Ladivine notices an item of her clothing from Berlin which was never packed for this holiday. Inexplicably ashamed, she does not dare to mention this mystery to her husband or children. The kindly dog continues to follow her, however, and she is hailed by a woman on a bus who seems to recognize her as a guest at a recent local wedding. Ladivine herself feels as if she recognizes some of the people she encounters here, and Marko comments on her vague resemblance to many of the local women. Meeting the brown dog again, Ladivine feels a very intense emotional connection as she looks into its eyes, and suddenly wishes she could *become* it. On a visit to the national museum, the family meet Wellington, a young man who offers to be their guide. Explaining the history of the violent images in the paintings they survey, he seems to be accusing them of something. Despite their malaise, they allow Wellington to take them for dinner at a house of friends of his. Ladivine notices that the dog has followed them there. She ends up relaxing at the dinner. When an old woman begins asking her about the recent wedding she is supposed to have attended, she gives answers so detailed that she cannot be sure if she is inventing them or not. Wellington interrupts her, however, insinuating that the couple whose wedding this was are corrupt and oppressive. Ladivine and her family leave, and Marko criticizes her for having lied. Back at the hotel, Ladivine wakes in the middle of the night to find Marko grappling with Wellington on the balcony. Marko throws Wellington over the railing, and the young man falls six flights, presumably to his death. The family go on the run. They drive to stay with a middle-aged couple, the Cagnacs, friends of Richard Rivière, who have emigrated from France and live in a large house at the edge of a forest. Ladivine is ostracized by the Cagnacs, who appear interested only in Marko and the children, whom they seem to be trying to seduce with food and alcohol. The children behave more and more hysterically and are bizarrely aggressive towards Ladivine. Wandering out into the night, Ladivine meets the rich young couple whose wedding she is supposed to have attended; they are buying a car from M. Cagnac. Ladivine talks briefly with them, and the young woman gives her a new pair of sandals. Back in the house, Ladivine sees Wellington, who is alive and well and working as a servant for the Cagnacs. Marko is distraught upon hearing the news, and seems to lose all the vigour he has recently gained from affirmation by the Cagnacs; they, meanwhile, begin to despise him openly. Ladivine wanders back out into the night, convinced that her mother is calling her from the depths of the forest. Entering it, she feels herself becoming

the brown dog. Back in Berlin, Annika resents the brown dog who is apparently watching over her and following her to school every day. She knows it is her mother Ladvine, whom she has not forgiven for disappearing on holiday. Richard Rivière lives in Annecy with his partner, another woman named Clarisse, and her hostile, overweight, adult son Trevor. He has never met his daughter Ladvine's husband and children, but often thinks fondly of them. He is tortured by memories of the first Clarisse and by his total failure to access whatever impenetrable secret she held onto throughout the years of their spectral marriage. One day he telephones his daughter Ladvine in Berlin, only to be told by Marko that Ladvine never returned from holiday, having been swallowed up by the country they were staying in. Richard hopes for a sign from Ladvine, possibly now incarnated in the mountain: she will bring word, he is sure, of the 'real' Clarisse. Ladvine Sylla is preparing for the trial of her daughter's killer, Freddy Moliger. On her way to the courthouse, she notices a brown dog, who seems to be watching her, and who reminds her of her dead daughter Malinka. Back at her house, she prepares coffee for her ex-son-in-law Richard Rivière, whom she has met for the first time at Freddy Moliger's trial. Richard seems tense, but Ladvine is relatively composed. Something scratches at the door: it is the brown dog, which has come, Ladvine is sure, bearing Malinka's beating heart.

Theatre

Hilda (1999)

Mme Lemarchand, a wealthy, self-proclaimed French radical, former 'revolutionary', housewife and mother, calls Franck, a local handyman, to her house and demands the immediate domestic services of his wife Hilda, into whom she has already done a lot of research. Franck reluctantly agrees under pressure and promises to send Hilda the next day. Mme Lemarchand calls round the next day to Franck and Hilda's house, whilst Hilda is busy doing her new, paid domestic duties. She gives Franck the money for Hilda's services, and tells him in detail of her plans to transform Hilda's appearance and attitude, which at the moment is too deferential: it is important that she start to act as Mme Lemarchand's friend and equal. Franck is bemused and irritated. He arrives at Mme Lemarchand's house one day after an accident at work, but is told that Hilda cannot see him. Mme Lemarchand insists that

Hilda's duties are more pressing than her attendance to Franck's wound. The next day Franck arrives at Mme Lemarchand's house to complain that Hilda has not come home. Mme Lemarchand tells him that she has the right to keep Hilda since she has given Franck a large financial advance for her services. She promises to bring Hilda over next week, however, so that he can see her. Franck leaves, furious. The next week Mme Lemarchand arrives at Franck's house with Hilda in the car. Franck goes down to talk to Hilda but returns without her, apparently having failed to convince her to come home. Meanwhile, Mme Lemarchand chats condescendingly with Hilda's angry sister Corinne, who is helping Franck to look after Hilda's abandoned children. She announces to Franck and Corinne that Hilda is moving to Paris with the Lemarchand family. Some months later, Mme Lemarchand arrives at Franck's house. She has changed in appearance, now resembling Hilda when she was first hired. She describes to a hostile Franck that Hilda has become a quasi-zombie, mute, no longer able to work, and no longer paid, a pitied and despised empty shell of a woman. Despite their order that she leave them in peace, the transformed Mme Lemarchand invites Franck and Corinne, who now live together, to come over one day for dinner.

Providence (2001)

A woman named Providence wanders through her old village, asking the various inhabitants if they have seen her missing child. The Hotelkeeper and his Wife shut their door on her, appalled at her hooves, but at the same time betray their fascination and desire. The Schoolmistress, questioned by a mysterious Investigator, denies all knowledge of Providence's story, but does mention snatches of a tale of whipping and transformation. The Solicitor, the Pharmacist and the Professor, also questioned by the Investigator, do their best to mask their shame and their emotion, but let slip their knowledge of Providence's origins, her upbringing by a couple thought to be sterile, her supernatural appearance. Visiting the Priest, Providence demands that the father of her child make himself known. She and the Priest argue over what exactly happened to the child, Providence insisting that it was taken away from her, the Priest claiming that she fed it to pigs. The Barrister and the Assistant Manager dine with the Investigator, giving him fragments of narrative about the death of Providence's parents and her subsequent vulnerability to the villagers' desires. Meanwhile, the Barmaid who serves them chatters about her own sad origins, her mad mother, her abandoning father. The Insurance Salesman and Providence

are interviewed together by the Investigator. While the Insurance Salesman mocks Providence, she considers whether or not she should sell her whole story to the Investigator. Growing increasingly agitated, she begins to scream that a crowd of villagers is arriving to kill her. In a final scene, the Barmaid talks to the Priest of her sad past and her wish for somebody to know her story.

Papa doit manger (2003)

Papa (formerly known as 'Ahmed', now called 'Aimé'), an African living in France, returns after ten years' unexplained absence to his French wife and young daughters Mina and Ami, demanding forgiveness and readmission into the family home in the working-class Paris suburb of Courbevoie. Transformed into an apparently successful businessman, and more youthful of aspect than ever, Papa soon wins over Maman, a hairdresser, despite both his former abandonment of the family, and her own new relationship with Zelner, a middle-aged, left-wing, cannabis-smoking French teacher. Maman's parents, backed up by her aunts José and Clémence, staunchly oppose her decision to take off with Papa and the girls, horrified both by Papa's mysterious request for money and by his unchanged blackness. Papa has, in fact, been lying to everybody: poverty-stricken and living with another woman, Anna, and their handicapped baby in a slum in Courbevoie (he has never been away), it seems he is merely planning to swindle Maman. Zelner visits Anna, asking her to help him prevent Papa and Maman from leaving them both, but Anna refuses, cursing Papa for his unreliability and for his having wished their baby dead. Zelner, meanwhile, expounds on the moral difficulty of hating a black person. Some time later, the aunts relate that Maman, knowing of Papa's deception all along, stabbed him in the face and returned with the girls to Zelner. Aunt Clémence prepares a spell against Papa, hoping to bring his fortunes still lower than the mutilation he has suffered at the hands of his wife. Years later, the adult Mina tells of her and her husband's hardship, having to feed and keep her destitute father, transformed into an aged, weak, humiliated being, whose blackness now appears as a sort of infirmity, and who still visits the magnanimous Maman and Zelner in Courbevoie. She tells of how her sister Ami has become a drug addict, and of how Maman looks younger than ever. She also reports the death of Papa and Anna's baby, and speaks of the 'law' that ties her and Ami to Papa forever. As Maman gets ready to go to Zelner's funeral, and worries about Ami's disappearance, the frail and

unrecognizable Papa asks to be taken back again, since he has, after all, remained 'Papa'. Maman refuses to promise anything, but admits to an inexplicable feeling she terms love.

Les Serpents (2004)

Mme Diss waits outside her estranged adult son's isolated house in the blazing sun, hoping that he will invite her in and lend her money. It is 14 July, a day of national celebration, and a firework display is due to take place at nightfall. Mme Diss talks on the threshold to France, her son's current wife, asking her for help in persuading the son to lend his mother money. France, believing herself to be socially inferior to Mme Diss, agrees to go into the house and to do her best for her contemptuous mother-in-law. Another woman arrives: it is Nancy, the first wife of Mme Diss's son. The smartly dressed Nancy hates and despises Mme Diss, but begs her to tell everything she knows about what happened to Jacky, the child Nancy had with Mme Diss's son. Mme Diss tells Nancy what she knows, in exchange for money: upon Nancy's departure, Mme Diss's son tortured and eventually killed little Jacky, locking him in a cage with poisonous snakes. Filled with remorse at her abandonment of her child, Nancy announces her intention to visit Jacky's grave with the boy's father, to acknowledge their joint fault, and to beg their dead child's forgiveness. France returns, and tells Mme Diss and Nancy that Jacky's ghost is still inside the house, haunting the whole family. Nancy reaffirms her desire to move forward by making amends for what she has allowed to happen. France reports that Mme Diss's son has tied up her (France's) living children inside the house, but that she, at least, has now escaped, having become conscious of her oppression. Nancy agrees to take France's place inside the house: she will enter as if she were Nancy, and will rescue France's children, as well as setting in motion her plan for reparation vis-à-vis Jacky. France, meanwhile, will 'become' Nancy, and will start a new life with Mme Diss and her current husband. Nancy enters the house, where she is almost instantly overwhelmed by its horror and by the conviction that she is about to be eaten. Years later, France returns to the house, where she finds Mme Diss guarding the threshold. The two women briefly quarrel over events relating to the years they spent together, before Mme Diss tells France to be on her way.

Rien d'humain (2004)

Bella, a wealthy mother of two, returns home from America to find that her friend Djamila, who has been flat-sitting, will not let her back into her own home. Bella tries to plead with Djamila's boyfriend Ignace to make Djamila see sense, but Ignace explains that Djamila's mind is made up and that she will not budge. He also mentions Djamila's baby, whom he has never seen, but hopes is his. Bella's speech is peppered with bizarre and obscene outbursts which seem to come from another dimension, and which speak of sexual violence. Djamila confirms her own intransigence, alluding to the unforgivable nature of Bella's bourgeois condescension. Ignace and Djamila visit Bella in her new abode, a slum once inhabited by Djamila. The story of their friendship emerges: Djamila was taken in when young by Bella's family, but was raped by Bella's father and brothers. Bella offers to give Djamila her apartment, but Djamila refuses the act of generosity, insisting that she is proud to have taken the apartment illegally and by force. Ignace allows Bella to stay at his place, but when he returns there, terrified at the unspeakable nature of the entity he has glimpsed at Djamila's, Bella refuses to let him in, even though she concedes that he is a terrific guy.

Les Grandes Personnes (2011)

Éva and Rudi, a middle-aged married couple, invite their old friends Georges and Isabelle over to discuss recent distressing events in their family life. Having disappeared from their lives nearly two decades ago, their adult Daughter has recently returned. She is, however, in ghost-form, and lurks spectrally underneath their staircase. Georges and Isabelle try to offer sympathy. Meanwhile, their own son, the Schoolteacher, confesses to his parents that he is sexually assaulting the young children in his care, but Georges and Isabelle ignore him. Mme B., the mother of one of his victims, tries to gain justice for her son by denouncing the abuse at a parents' meeting, but she too is ignored. When she confronts the Schoolteacher, he refuses to acknowledge his crime, and escapes from her by turning into a bird and flying away. Mme B. is accused by the other parents of witchcraft, and is savagely beaten. Meanwhile, the ghost of Éva and Rudi's Daughter has joined forces with her adoptive brother, the Son, who also left Éva and Rudi a long time ago. The Son is still alive, but is inhabited by spectral Voices – his dead biological parents – who command him to murder Éva and Rudi for having stolen him away from his native culture. The Daughter is able to communicate with the Son's Voices, as they are on the same

ontological wavelength as she is. Georges and Isabelle come once more to Éva and Rudi's house. There, all four parents are confronted by the Daughter and by the Voices of the Son. The Daughter explains that she was unable to live with her parents because of a mysterious fault at the heart of the family, but forgives everybody before finally leaving for good. Georges and Isabelle separate, unable to stand their own son's disappearance. Georges visits Éva, and the two reveal the secret of their own erstwhile coupling, which resulted in the birth of the Daughter. Finally, Éva and Rudi converse with the Voices in the Son's chest, and the two sets of parents fill each other in on different aspects of their dear boy's childhood and infancy.

Short Stories

'Un voyage' (1997)

The eighteen-year-old narrator is invited by her cousin Rose for a holiday in China, where Rose now lives, following her marriage to a civil servant in Peking. The narrator's family, reluctant to let her go, and mistrustful of Rose, a perennial outsider, accompany her to the airport, but consider her departure a kind of death. Upon her arrival in China, the narrator discovers that Rose and her husband occupy a lowly position within the community of civil servants and their wives. The wives live in a nightmarish, harem-like palace, rigidly organized along strict lines of hierarchy and the abolition of all sentiment. Marital relationships are kept under strict surveillance, and even the Emperor appears to be trapped in a cage of spectacle and artifice. Rose, betraying fascination and envy for the narrator – at the same time as expressing hatred and contempt for the family back in France and for France itself – eventually makes a bizarre request. The narrator, Rose says, is considered physically desirable by a high-ranking civil servant: would it be possible for her to transmit her bodily aspect to the wife of this man? If she were to agree to such an exchange of appearance, the status of both Rose and her own husband would be much improved within the community. The narrator reluctantly agrees to a series of metamorphosis sessions, during which the previously undesirable senior wife gradually absorbs the principal dimensions of the narrator's being. Helplessly attached to the woman who has successfully transformed into her former self, the narrator asks Rose if she may stay on at the palace as the senior wife's assistant. Rose, now promoted, agrees, even though

she is no happier than she was before, completely absorbed as she is in scrutinizing the other wives, all of whom remain strangely resistant to her attempts at meaningful sight.

‘Le Jour du président’ (1997)

Olga, a student in Le Havre, is in an advanced state of anorexia, and is barely able to move or to formulate a coherent thought. Feeling herself to be horrifically light and insubstantial, she is dimly aware of her two housemates’ contemptuous indifference, but is unable to recall their names with any certainty. The housemates, excited at the prospect of President Chirac’s planned visit to Le Havre that day, mock Olga for her seeming ignorance of Chirac’s very identity. Olga becomes determined to attend the President’s event at the town hall later that day, but at the same time is increasingly panic-stricken at the fact that she is not sure of his first name. Wandering along the beach and increasingly removed from reality, Olga is sexually pursued by a xenophobic youth, but is interested only in whether or not this youth knows the President’s first name. Eventually she arrives at the town hall, where she has a vision of her cold and critical mother – herself an enormous admirer of Chirac – in attendance at the event, exuding a fantastical light that feels like love itself. Olga collapses, opening her eyes to find the face of the President over her, although she is still unsure of his name.

‘Tous mes amis’ (2004)

The narrator, a middle-aged schoolteacher who has been abandoned by his wife and two teenage sons, is frustrated by the unfriendliness of his thirty-year-old housekeeper Séverine. He finds Séverine’s attitude all the more infuriating given the fact that she was once his pupil. The narrator’s only source of comfort is another former pupil, the bourgeois Werner, who reassures him that he has nothing to apologize for vis-à-vis his ex-wife and children, while also soliciting his help in seducing Séverine away from her husband Jamel (yet another former pupil), whom Werner and the narrator refer to simply as ‘Le Maghrébin’. The narrator invites Werner, Séverine and Jamel to his house, where Werner declares his love for Séverine. When Séverine rejects Werner, the narrator attacks her, before he is beaten to the ground by Jamel. Werner subsequently condemns Jamel to death, and the narrator goes to Jamel’s family home, where he waits patiently for the condemned man to arrive.

'La Mort de Claude François' (2004)

Zaka, a middle-aged doctor, is surprised when her childhood friend Marlène, whom she has not seen for several years, turns up one day at her surgery for a physical examination. Marlène makes Zaka feel guilty for having left their old working-class neighbourhood so long ago. Later that day, waiting to pick her daughter Paula up from school, Zaka remembers details of her childhood, when the death of the pop singer Claude François caused all the mothers of the housing estate, including her own, to enter a deep depression. The twelve-year-old Marlène too had been inconsolable. Noticing her ex-husband, Paula's father, at the school gates, Zaka is enraged, and insults him. When Paula finally arrives, Zaka, overwhelmed by her daughter's resemblance to Marlène, falls heavily to the ground. A few days later, Zaka and Paula take the bus to Zaka's childhood *banlieue*. Zaka has dressed Paula in a special outfit for the outing. Arriving at Marlène's high-rise building, Zaka tells Paula to wait for her outside, while she goes up alone. Marlène greets Zaka wearing a pair of blue contact lenses. Her apartment is covered in photographs of Claude François. Zaka tries to tell Marlène how much she loves her, but Marlène reminds her of the fact that she, Zaka, abandoned her own parents in the *banlieue*, and that it was Marlène who had to care for them. Marlène also announces her decision to take her own life: she has sworn not to live beyond the age at which Claude François himself died, and needs Zaka's help in committing suicide. Suddenly aware that Marlène is no longer her friend, Zaka runs from the apartment, but Paula is not where she left her. Zaka pursues a shape she thinks is Paula and which seems to be accompanied by the figure of a man. Eventually, she finds Paula waiting alone at the bus-stop.

'Les Garçons' (2004)

René, a poor boy in a seemingly poor land, spends most of his time in the kitchen of the Mour family, who tolerate his presence as they would a dog's. René lives with his mother and multiple half-siblings, but does not know his father, who could be one of several men who occasionally turn up at the house. One day, a middle-aged woman named E. Blaye arrives at the Mour household to take away Anthony, the handsome, eldest Mour boy; René wishes that it could have been him. A few days later, Mme Mour shows René images of Anthony on the internet: he appears slightly modified, and frolics, naked, with E. Blaye. René asks Mme Mour if she can help him get sold like Anthony. He later prays in church that he will be offered the chance to be chosen. Hanging around

at the Mours a few days later, René notices a workman who he thinks might be his own father. The workman seems mesmerized by the images of Anthony which Mme Mour continues to download proudly off the internet. Mme Mour tells René that she may have found him a buyer. A couple of days later, René waits with his suitcase by the side of the road. A car arrives to pick him up. Upon catching sight of the driver, René whines with fear and regret.

‘Une journée de Brulard’ (2004)

Ève Brulard (referred to by the narrator simply as ‘Brulard’), an obscure, middle-aged film actress, wanders around a Swiss mountain resort, in the throes of some kind of breakdown. She is convinced that her recently dead mother inhabits the village mountain. She is also harassed by menacing telephone calls, and is pursued by visions of different versions of her younger self, all of which mock and deride her. Her husband Jimmy turns up with a dog he has recently adopted, claiming that he thought the dog was Brulard. Jimmy wants to look after Brulard and to take her home; he appears to have forgiven her affair with another actor. They notice their teenage daughter Lulu on holiday with some family friends. Brulard and Jimmy go to visit Jimmy’s acquaintances the Rotors. Brulard feels increasingly disorientated and terrified. The Rotors’ dog eats Jimmy’s dog. Brulard, Jimmy and the Rotors go out to a restaurant for dinner. Lulu, her hair dyed orange, arrives at the same restaurant, but appears not to notice her parents. Mme Rotor reads a newspaper story about a film actor who has recently committed suicide. Jimmy stares lovingly at his estranged wife.

‘Révélation’ (2004)

A mother is taking her mentally disabled son by coach to the institution where she intends to leave him for good. She feels guilty both for the imminent abandonment and for her mounting cruelty towards the boy, but she has made her decision. On the coach, she becomes aware that the driver and all the passengers are staring at her son as if they are under a magical spell. The boy seems suddenly unbearably calm and beautiful. When she finally tells him that she will return home without him, he appears to accept the news with lucid magnanimity.

‘Les Sœurs’ (2008)

Paula and Victoire are sisters. Despite having the same parents – a ‘black’ father and a ‘white’ mother – they do not resemble one another

at all: Paula is extremely light-skinned, and practically ‘passes’ for white, while Victoire is dark-skinned, appearing to have no European heritage at all. The lives of the two sisters are observed from the perspective of Bertini, an unpopular and unattractive boy of their age, who follows them everywhere and becomes their friend. Bertini becomes aware over the years of a web of strange fantasies and injustices surrounding the sisters. Victoire is widely considered unlucky and unattractive, while Paula is thought to be the beautiful and fortunate one, having inherited whiteness when she could so easily have been black. The sisters’ psychological and behavioural development seems to run counter to the path that has been set out for them, however. Paula grows increasingly preoccupied by the question of ‘race’, coming to see herself as doomed to rejection owing to her ‘black blood’; she withdraws from society. Victoire, on the other hand, seemingly makes the best of her slightly inferior starting position, becoming relatively popular and, eventually, successful in her career. Bertini, by now in love with Victoire, one day makes the mistake of discussing with her the many significant instances of racialized discrimination he has seen her undergo over the years. Victoire reluctantly admits to having indeed perceived these disadvantages, but subsequently shuns Bertini, cutting him out of her life completely. A distraught and obsessed Bertini reflects that Victoire has carved out a life of dissemblance and subterfuge for herself and, furthermore, that she will never forgive him for having found her out.

Picture Books for Adults

La Naufragée (with illustrations by J. M. W. Turner) (1999)

A being who is part-fish, part-woman finds herself in the streets of nineteenth-century Paris. She narrates her confused and frightened impressions of a world in which she has no bearings, is tormented by her ‘half-ling’ ontology, and fails to be recognized as a creature invested with any humanity whatsoever. Every page of her narrative is interspersed with a characteristically blurred, light-flooded painting by J. M. W. Turner. Half-blind and unable to walk without the help of crutches, the narrator stumbles from street to street, desperate to return to the sea, but completely ignorant of how she might do so. Verbally and physically abused by the various people she encounters, who see in her only the figure of a monster, the woman-fish is eventually picked up by an English painter, who decides to take her with him by boat back to

London. The woman-fish no longer narrates the tale, which is instead now related in the third person, from the perspective of the English painter. Entranced by the woman-fish's indescribable song, the painter is determined to try to transmit something of the quality of the sound into his own paintings. He keeps her locked up in a tub in a water-closet in his London abode, and commands her to sing as he paints. His work is transfigured, but the woman-fish herself is gradually emptied of all semblance of life. When the painter himself dies, his friends are puzzled at the existence of the tub and strange water-closet, which they find empty, mysterious, but ultimately of little consequence.

Autoportrait en vert (with photographs by
Julie Ganzin and anon.) (2005)

The narrator, a published novelist, lives in a village near the Garonne river with her husband Jean-Yves and their growing brood of children. The river is constantly threatening to flood the village. The narrator describes her bewildering dealings with a number of strange women, most of whom she classifies in some way or another as 'femmes en vert'. Having just dropped her children off at school, she is spoken to by another young mother, a blonde woman in green shorts, whom she at first mistakes for her friend Cristina. The woman raves about having left her own children in the care of her parents, before discovering that her father hates and fears his grandchildren. She also mentions the fact that the villagers are in pursuit of a mysterious black shape. Realising that the woman is not, in fact, Cristina, the narrator begins talking with the real Cristina, who also asks her if she is in the know about the black shape. The narrator leaves the school and drives to a house nearby: she is looking for a strange woman she thinks she has seen standing outside the house, next to a banana tree. She sees the woman jump from her balcony onto the grass. Unhurt, the dark-haired, green-eyed woman, who turns out to be called Katia Depetiteville, picks herself up, and invites the narrator into the house for coffee, where she talks at the narrator about her difficult life and disappointing children. When the narrator later mentions Katia Depetiteville to people in the village she is told that Katia Depetiteville died a decade ago; the narrator is unsurprised. The two women carry on seeing one another for a time, nearly becoming friends. The narrator describes the remarriage of her father to her former best friend. Visiting the couple at their restaurant, Ledada, in the twentieth arrondissement of Paris, the narrator notices that her formerly brown-eyed stepmother now wears green contact

lenses. The narrator starts to think that there is something strange about the proliferation of greenness, and wonders if it is a message directed at her. One day, a man enters Ledada and smashes the place up with a golf club. He turns out to be a half-brother of the narrator, angry at their father's lack of presence. The narrator goes on to recount the strange tale of Jenny, a depressed, dyed-platinum-blonde woman with whom she is acquainted for a few years. Jenny is at the end of her tether, having been fired, left by her husband, and shunned by her adopted son, all in more or less the same period. She moves back home to her aged parents, themselves depressed, and made sadder still by their daughter's perceived failure. Jenny runs into an old boyfriend, Ivan, who is now married to a seemingly successful woman, a woman who, according to the narrator, is a 'femme en vert'. While the narrator devotes herself to listening to sad Jenny, Jenny herself is in thrall to Ivan's wife, before whom she feels bland and insignificant. One day, she goes looking for Ivan's wife, but finds her dead, having hanged herself. The narrator loses track of Jenny after this, but runs into her a couple of years later, now married to the widowed Ivan. Jenny claims that she has met Ivan's dead wife in a green coat with dyed green fur collar. This ghost is elegant and profoundly sexual. Ivan and Jenny split up, both obsessed with Ivan's dead first wife. Jenny's mother tells the narrator (whose children she and her husband have frequently looked after during the narrator's long conversations with Jenny) that the ghost of Ivan's first wife has visited her too. The narrator has resolved to break with Jenny and her family, when Jenny is discovered dead, having taken an overdose of prescription drugs. A while later, the narrator meets Jenny's parents sitting happily with Ivan and his first wife. The narrator tells us now about her own mother, who has transformed into a 'femme en vert'. The mother has gone from being an ugly, reclusive woman, living with the narrator's two depressed sisters in the Parisian *banlieue*, to a new life in Marseilles, where she has married a young man, Rocco, and has a young daughter, Bella. The narrator goes down to Marseilles to visit her mother and her new family for Christmas, leaving her own children behind in Aquitaine. The mother is now glamorous but still very distant, refusing all intimacy with the narrator, who leaves after three depressing days in the cold and ramshackle house. The Garonne continues to rise, and Katia Depetiteville telephones the narrator for help. The narrator's husband Jean-Yves goes to rescue Katia Depetiteville, who leaps unexpectedly from her balcony and lands in his boat. The narrator travels up with Katia Depetiteville to Paris,

where they visit the narrator's two sisters. Katia Depetiteville, strangely contemptuous, leaves abruptly, never to be seen again. The sisters seem to be doing better than they were, but the narrator cannot shake off a feeling of sadness. The sisters tell her that their mother has returned to Paris, and now lives downstairs. It is not clear what has happened to their little half-sister Bella. As she is on her way out, the narrator listens to her mother's heavy breathing. The narrator decides to accept an invitation to take part in a conference in Ouagadougou where her work is being discussed, and at the same time to visit her father, who now lives in that city with his wife, the narrator's former best friend. She takes her own eleven-year-old daughter, Marie, with her. The father is in a terrible state, practically blind, refusing to eat, and full of nervous rage. The narrator regrets having come. The conference is poorly attended. The ex-best friend sees the narrator and Marie off at the airport, where she announces her intention to leave the narrator's father, to return to France and to live with the narrator's mother until she finds a job. She mentions that Bella is now in a children's home in Marseilles, where the narrator's mother goes down to visit her twice a month. The narrator imagines Bella coming to visit her in fifteen or twenty years' time, dressed entirely in green. At home one day, the narrator hears her children shouting in the yard. They are chasing a black shape, although the narrator denies seeing it. Driving through the water-logged plains one day shortly after the river has ceased to rise, the narrator wonders if the Garonne itself is a 'femme en vert'.

Y penser sans cesse (with photographs by Denis Cointe) (2011)

The narrator, a recent French émigrée to Germany, sits in a sun-drenched Berlin park with her timid young son. He reflects on the fact that he does not know much about who his mother really is. He also asks her about the people who once lived in their house. The narrator comes to realize that her son is somehow inhabited by the spirit of the little Wellenstein boy, who, along with his family, was deported from Germany some years ago, and has now taken up residence in the narrator's son's heart. The narrator watches the mothers sitting around them, breastfeeding their children, and observes that her own son will have no breast milk; neither will his old, dark 'friend'. She notes the boy's hunger, and the way in which the German language is beginning to take possession of his faculties of expression, before encouraging him not to chase his wandering child ghost-guest from his heart. And she remembers the black-and-white dog of her own childhood, in whom

she thought her absent father's spirit dwelt. While at times believing that this spectral father was preparing to kidnap her, she realises that in truth he had little interest in her. The narrator and her son return to their yellow Berlin abode.

Picture Books for Children

La Diabliesse et son enfant (with illustrations by Nadja) (2000)

A dark-skinned, bright-eyed, forest-dwelling she-devil wanders from house to house, asking if anyone has seen her missing child. Whilst the she-devil's face is pleasant, her cloven feet are experienced by the villagers as horrifying, and so she is generally shunned. The she-devil cannot remember how she lost her child and her home, but knows that her feet turned into hooves only after these terrible losses, which took place in a hot country far away. Meanwhile, the villagers begin to worry that the she-devil's lost child may actually be among them, and so begin a campaign of foot-inspection among the infant population. One day the she-devil comes across a child who has been ejected from the village on account of her deformed feet. The she-devil picks up the child and carries her off, before suddenly noticing that her own feet have taken on human shape again. Furthermore, she discovers a little lit-up house on the edge of the forest, in which she and her new daughter can live together in peace.

Les Paradis de Prunelle (with illustrations by Pierre Mornet) (2003)

Little Odilon is perplexed when his older sister Prunelle comes out of hospital after a short illness and tells him that she has been to all the heavens. She has not only experienced existence as a transparent soul during her trip but has also learnt a fundamental truth: in heaven there is always something missing. Stranger even than her tale of fantastical voyage is Prunelle's new attitude, which is supernaturally calm and indifferent, but also oddly distracted and melancholic. Odilon decides that Prunelle must be bewitched. More worrying still is the fact that Prunelle seems persuaded that her return to Earth is only provisional. Prunelle returns to hospital, and this time she does not return. The children's parents grow more and more worried, all the while ignoring Odilon's attempts to talk to them about Prunelle's story of the heavens. Help eventually arrives in the shape of the children's aunt Peggy, who lives in a hot country far away. Odilon talks to her of Prunelle's visit to

the heavens, and Aunt Peggy listens. She tells Odilon that she will bring Prunelle back home. After several weeks of visits to the hospital, Aunt Peggy does just this. Odilon asks the paler, thinner Prunelle what the final heaven was like, but she just laughs at him, exactly as she would have done in the old days. Odilon kisses his sister.

Le Souhait (with illustrations by Alice Charbin) (2005)

A depressed married couple dream of having a child of their own. It is Christmas Eve, and snowing, but, having no child to buy presents for, the man and woman simply buy piles of gifts for nobody. On Christmas morning a little girl with black hair, black eyes and black skin wakes up in the couple's house. Her name is Camélia. She finds herself surrounded by presents and in the care of two disembodied hearts, who tell her of their abundant love and joy at finally having a child of their own. Camélia carries the hearts everywhere. They ask her incessantly if she likes her presents, and ask her with equal frequency if she loves *them*, her parents. If she hesitates, the hearts appear to bleed, split, or break a little. Camélia realizes that these two hearts beat only for her, and have no desire other than that she carry them wherever she goes. One day whilst out in the park, Camélia puts the hearts on a bench so that she may run and play more freely. Enjoying her games more than ever, she leaves the park at nightfall, before suddenly remembering that she has left the hearts on the bench. The park is closed for the night, however, and Camélia must return home alone, overwhelmed by the guilt of perhaps having lost her parental hearts. The next day Camélia finds the hearts still on the bench, but they have grown hard and icy: nothing she can do will warm the hearts up, not even once she gets them home. Camélia finds herself turning more and more cold, blank and listless, eventually falling into a deep, depressed sleep. The next day, however, Camélia finds that a full-bodied man and woman are in the house to look after her and to be her parents. These people – the story's original married couple – are now prepared to take Camélia for a walk, and no longer seem in need of the child's constant reassurance.

Notes

Introduction

1 I was later reminded of those strange sequences in certain films by David Lynch, in which the hero finds him or herself watching a singing woman on stage in the middle of the night. These female performers are always semi-monstrous automata who nevertheless provoke unbearably ‘real’ emotion in the weeping spectator-protagonist.

2 As the half-dead little Prunelle enigmatically puts it in NDiaye’s children’s book *Les Paradis de Prunelle*: ‘Oui, il manque toujours quelque chose au paradis’ (*PP*, 28).

3 My project is thus not dissimilar in its ‘empty-centred’ approach from those carried out by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit in their work on Beckett, Rothko and Resnais (1994) or Ciaran Ross in another study of Beckett (2011), which employs many of the British psychoanalytic models I have found so useful in my work on NDiaye. NDiaye’s own areas of overlap as an artist with Beckett are not negligible, though they should not be overstated. Whilst not wishing to explore the issue at length here, I would argue that she is ultimately a far less depressing writer.

4 Some articles (e.g. Argand, 2001) go so far as to provide photographic evidence of NDiaye’s white French maternal grandparents. It does seem a little excessive, especially given these grandparents’ allegedly unremarkable lives. Are Marie Redonnet’s grandparents photographed and their specific regions of origin mentioned constantly in their interviews? Or Marie Nimier’s? As for Marie Darrieussecq, it is usually she who invokes her Basque grandmother precisely in order to insist upon a certain *abnormality* of origin, never more ostentatiously than in her open letter to NDiaye and the world, a missive entitled ‘Sorguina’ (‘witch’ in Basque) (Darrieussecq, 1998).

5 Marie generally spells her name ‘NDiaye’, while Pap goes by ‘Ndiaye’.

6 See Bernstein (1989), Lebrun (1991), Motard-Noar (1999).

7 Both Rousseau and Proust could be considered as hybrid as NDiaye, of course, in terms of their respective Swiss and Jewish backgrounds.

8 Pap Ndiaye's tone when discussing his own experience of racism is, in fact, not that far removed from Marie's in terms of its complete refusal to acknowledge pain. After mentioning instances of stop-and-search (twice in one year), scrutiny of his credentials and disbelief in libraries and airports, and constant, incongruous 'tutoiement', he concludes by playing it all down. According to Boltanski (2007): 'Il refuse à lui-même la différence qu'il revendique pour les autres. Lorsque cet homme [...] parle de lui tout est toujours "ordinaire". Il minimise les marques d'opprobre qu'il a subies. "Ce sont des petits indices qui ne pourraient pas la vie. Je les prends plutôt avec un sourire." Il se déclare Noir intermittent: "Dans ma vie familial, avec mes collègues et amis, ça ne joue pas. Cela se manifeste à l'extérieur. [...] Vous savez, j'ai une vie banale d'universitaire."' I find this last statement, coming, as it does, from a historian and sociologist, somewhat bewildering in the way it appears to split off personal experience from the work of analysis, as if they were two entirely unrelated things.

9 NDiaye recalls her literary emergence thus: 'J'avais 17 ans, je vivais en grande banlieue, loin de tout, j'écrivais depuis toujours. Un jour, j'ai eu l'impression qu'un nombre de pages ressemblait à un livre. Je l'ai envoyé à trois adresses prises dans le Bottin, un peu au hasard, Gallimard et le Seuil, les plus connus, et aussi Minuit, à cause de Marguerite Duras qui venait de publier *L'Amant*. Dès le lendemain, j'ai reçu un coup de fil de Jérôme Lindon, qui souhaitait publier le *Riche Avenir*. Le samedi suivant, il est venu m'attendre à la sortie de mon lycée avec le contrat. Je crois que j'ai eu de la chance' (Pascale, 2004).

10 Moudileno is the critic who has hitherto most systematically explored what may be at stake in NDiaye's use of textual lacunae (Moudileno, 1998), grammatical disjunction and disconnection (Moudileno, 2006), linguistic 'excellence' (Moudileno, 2009) and public (in)visibililty (Moudileno, 2013a). Her important work on NDiayan silence, oscillation, paradox and impeccability has, in many ways, laid the foundations for my own theoretical framework of 'blankness and recognition'.

11 See also NDiaye's husband Jean-Yves Cendrey's (2009) coruscating critique of the affair, as well as Dominic Thomas's (2010) scholarly analysis.

12 With my frequent use of the terms 'psychotherapy' and 'psychodynamic', I seek merely (perhaps pointlessly) to mark my distance from the increasingly ossified academic genuflection before a form of 'psychoanalysis' (mainly the brand marketed by Jacques Lacan and his followers) which displays little interest in the *emotional experience* of the simultaneously dependent, fantasizing, interactive, instrumentalized, self-shaping, loving, hating, knowing and potentially revolutionary human subject. I find this same lack of interest in complex emotional and relational experience, in fact, within most of the theoretical paradigms that have assumed institutional hegemony in Western academia since the 1980s (e.g. deconstruction, postcolonialism,

‘French feminism’ or the more death-driven strands of ‘queer’ theory). I have attempted to read NDiaye in collaboration only with those writers who give the subject’s capacity for *conceivable psychic growth and transformation* the importance it (in my view) richly deserves.

13 Interestingly, Lydia Holt Garner evokes the non-politicized concept of *minus K* to make a point specific to racialization when she writes: ‘As Bion understood, thinking is an emotional experience and, in thinking about race and inequalities in psychotherapy services, minus K can come into force – it can feel easier not to know’ (Garner, 2003: 503)

14 See Ruhe (2013) for a discussion of NDiaye’s shame in Sartrean terms.

15 This moment is, of course, brilliantly evoked decades earlier in Frantz Fanon’s chapter ‘L’expérience vécue du Noir’, in which the narrator listens, appalled, at the observation ‘Tiens, un nègre!’ (Fanon, 1952: 88), all the while nauseatingly aware that *he* is the creature that is being discussed in this obscene manner.

16 In his work on the dead mother, Green clearly builds upon earlier research into maternal depression and its effect on infants, by Winnicott in particular. See, for example, Winnicott’s 1948 essay ‘Reparation in Respect of Mother’s Organized Defence against Depression’, in which he writes that children with depressed mothers ‘have a task which can never be accomplished. Their task is first to deal with mother’s mood’ (93).

17 Rosie’s encounter with the ‘new’ Mme Carpe and her stench of boxwood is reminiscent of Lucy Clifford’s almost unbelievably frightening 1882 ‘children’s story’, ‘The New Mother’, in which two little sisters named Blue-Eyes and the Turkey find that their disobedience towards their put-upon single mother causes her to leave them for ever. She will be replaced, however, by a ghastly ‘new mother’, who stares from glass eyes and drags a wooden tail. Neil Gaiman pays homage to the ‘new mother’ motif in his 2002 novel *Coraline*, in which the character of ‘the other mother’ has buttons for eyes.

18 For other studies on transgenerational trauma and ‘haunting’, see Ancelin Schützenberger (1998), Coles (2011) and Fromm (2011). If I have a tendency to compare the predominant ‘atmosphere’ of NDiaye’s writing to the art-house horror films of David Lynch, David Cronenberg *et al.* as much as to Flaubert, James and Proust, it is because her world is so saturated by this frequently visceral sensation of being haunted or infested by something inhuman. In terms of her intertextual affinities, NDiaye is radically postmodern.

19 There is a need for more research on not only the ‘dead’ mother but also the ‘dead’ father. The two British edited volumes of essays (Kohon, 1999 and Kalinich and Taylor, 2008) on both phenomena are useful, as is Eva Seligman’s *The Half-Alive Ones* (2006), on the impact of missing fathers. I have written elsewhere (Asibong, 2013a) on the racialized dimensions of ‘dead’ parent complex.

20 This question is the explicit theme in George A. Romero’s wonderful

pseudo-fantastical kitchen sink melodrama *Season of the Witch* (aka *Jack's Wife*, 1972).

21 See Roussos (2007) and Besand (2013) for more protracted inquiries into NDiaye's deployment of the various forms of non-realism.

Chapter One

1 The influential critic Jean-Pierre Richard's essay 'Le Trouble et le partage' (1996) can be considered an important turning point in the process of NDiaye's canonization.

2 The term 'post-black' has been associated with artists (and especially the curator Thelma Golden) attached to the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. According to Golden (2001), 'post-black' artists are 'adamant about not being labeled "black" artists, though their work [is] steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness [...] They are both post-Basquiat and post-Biggie. They embrace the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation, with a great ease and facility'. NDiaye may exist outside the American context Golden is primarily describing, but she is nevertheless instantly recognizable in the diagnosis.

3 For a brilliant account of how this process is enacted in *En famille*, see Cottille-Foley (2009a).

4 One later text which does resemble *QRA* in its essay-like aspects is, of course, 'Les Sœurs' (2008), which is, perhaps pertinently, NDiaye's only other 'high school drama'.

5 Freud's (1909) concept of the 'family romance', whereby the infant fantasizes about the discovery of new, fairytale parents, seems to be at the root of almost all NDiaye's narratives.

6 There are strong (albeit de-racialized) shades here of the colour-obsessed Paula from 'Les Sœurs', a text that, as I have already noted, resembles *QRA* both in its uncharacteristic, explicatory, essayistic lucidity and in its high school setting.

7 The episode strangely echoes both Freud's (1900) musings about the baby who 'hallucinates' the breast that will finally arrive, as well as Winnicott's thoughts on the 'good enough' mother being the one who manages to bring baby her magical breast-offering within the correct time period of baby's longing, i.e. before it gives up hope (2005: 130–1).

8 The desperate desire to be fed and nourished by a new parent-figure becomes, as we shall see, a recurring fantasy in many of the later texts, reaching its frenzied climax in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (2007).

9 It is impossible not to see in young Z's abortive relationship with Blériot the seeds of the 'moja sestra' syndrome I have described (Asibong, 2007) as occurring throughout the later texts, a syndrome whereby a protagonist recoils in horror from the greeting of a person she fears will cause her to be associated

with stigmatized marginalization. The name of the syndrome refers to the iconic scene in Jacques Tourneur's film *Cat People* (1942), when the heroine Irena, desperate to integrate into mainstream, human New York, shrinks in fear from the public greeting of another East European 'cat person'.

10 It is interesting to note, in conjunction with this interest in the group psychological function of the dead blonde goddess, NDiaye's repeatedly professed adoration for *Blonde*, Joyce Carol Oates's fictionalized account of the life and death of Marilyn Monroe.

11 'L'Art du roman', *Apostrophes*, 20 February 1987, available at www.ina.fr/video/CPB87001982.

12 Remember that this is precisely the schism represented by the Jekyll and Hyde sisters Paula and Victoire in 'Les Sœurs': while one sister points obsessively to the 'fact' of her (largely hallucinated) blackness, the other (an actual victim of racism) refuses to acknowledge that such a thing as racialized difference could even have existence in the world.

13 Other anorexic characters include Olga in 'Le Jour du Président', René in 'Les Garçons', Fanny in *En famille* and the father in *Autoportait en vert*. Both *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and *Papa doit manger* seem fixated on the problem of food and its paradoxical capacity to both nourish and sicken. NDiaye's characters always seem to feel that they are being abusively stuffed (with food, objects and other people's feelings), yet they also long for material to fill an internal void of dead nothingness.

14 In *Psycho*, the heroine Marion is, of course, famously murdered by the 'schizophrenic' Norman Bates halfway through the film, and is 'replaced' in the spectator's concerns by her sister Lila, her fiancé Sam and, of course, by Norman Bates himself. NDiaye's writing contains the spirits of many Hitchcockian characters and configurations, e.g. flocks of fantastical birds (*The Birds*, 1963), traumatized and impenetrable women (*Marnie*, 1964), powerful, dead first wives (*Rebecca*, 1940) and women split into light and dark versions of themselves, one human, the other inhuman (*Vertigo*, 1958).

15 Fancifully, perhaps, I see this figure as an avatar of Hervé Guibert (1955–91), NDiaye's handsome and ostentatiously transgressive 1980s Minuit 'sibling'.

16 The text resembles David Lynch's films *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) in its weaving of the protagonist's sense of personal nullity into the very disintegrating framework of her narrative perspective.

17 The text thus manages the remarkable feat of soldering together the contradictory psychic positions of the two sisters Paula and Victoire ('Les Sœurs', 2008), combining Paula's paranoid obsessiveness with Victoire's unremitting stance of disavowal. In a similarly fantastical feat of combination, Fanny physically brings together Victoire's accursed blackness with Paula's 'passable' lightness when she undergoes her resurrection-metamorphosis. The recurrence of a schizoid double-subjectivity in NDiaye's characters, sometimes

represented by a twin-like pair, sometimes co-habiting within the same body, may be compared at a number of levels both to Samuel Beckett's series of co-dependent double acts and to Jean Genet's much-discussed couple of the criminal and the saint.

18 For a more developed analysis of the peculiar workings of vision, invisibility and the stigma that dare not speak its name in *En famille*, see Nora Cottille-Foley (2009a).

19 Echoing both Gregor Samsa's paternal apple-assault in Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' (1915) and Carrie's stoning by tampons at the start of Stephen King's 1974 novel, NDiaye (like Kafka and King) riffs cruelly and comedically on the biblical trope of a silly saint's lapidation.

20 I am reminded of the violently divided speaker of Baudelaire's poem 'L'Héautontimorouménos' ('The Self-Tormentor'), as he reflects on 'la vorace Ironie / Qui me secoue et qui me mord' (Baudelaire, 1857).

21 For a longer meditation on the strange function of humour in NDiaye's writing, see my article on 'le rire blanc' (Asibong, 2013c).

22 Ladivine Sylla, in the later novel *Ladivine* (2013), represents NDiaye's most sustained attempt to date to turn the 'dark mother' (spurned here by her pale/'dead' daughter Malinka/Clarisse) into a more fleshed-out character, but it is debatable as to whether the creation is an entirely convincing one.

23 I have been much influenced by Bengsch's (2013) use of the term 'pacte de dépersonnalisation' to describe the disquieting process into which Herman enters.

24 For an extended discussion of NDiaye's writing through the specific lens of hospitality and inhospitality, see Jordan (2014).

25 Herman's relationship with the three young people anticipates the more sinister one later explored in the short story 'Tous mes amis' between that tale's teacher-narrator and his three former pupils, Séverine, Werner and 'le Maghrébin'.

26 'Ah, ah' is, interestingly, the blank non-phrase uttered incessantly by E. T. A. Hoffman's robot-heroine Olympia.

27 See Rabaté (2013b) for a fascinating discussion of the 'dérageage contrôlé' in the work of NDiaye.

28 Christopher Bollas (1987) coins the term 'normotic' to describe personalities that conform obsessively and to such a degree that all trace of their originality, their eccentricity, their healthy, living singularity is erased.

Chapter Two

1 Another public row which brought NDiaye into the public eye was the one she had with the novelist Marie Darrieussecq, whom she accused, in an open letter to the *Libération* newspaper (NDiaye, 1998a), of 'singerie', claiming that Darrieussecq's just-published fantastical tale of inexplicable

disappearance, *Naissance des fantômes*, bore unacceptable similarities to *Un temps de saison* and *La Sorcière* (see also Gaudemar, 1998). Darrieussecq (1998) responded with a well-publicized open letter of her own, as well as a book in 2010, *Rapport de police*, in which she subjects plagiarism plaintiffs to close psychological scrutiny.

2 The union of NDiaye, Denis and Huppert irresistibly calls to mind legendary literary–cinematic–star collaborations of the French past such as Marguerite Duras, Alain Resnais and Emmanuelle Riva for the film of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959).

3 The warm and communicative nature of the community of scholars that has sprung up around the study of NDiaye is like nothing I have ever experienced in the academic world. Its singularity bears witness, in my view, to the very aspect of NDiaye’s work around which this entire project revolves, namely the ‘radical aliveness’ provoked in the reader by exposure to the fantastical ‘deadness’ of the writing.

4 Herman and the Woman both ‘lose’ spouse and child right at the start of their narratives, and quickly ‘move on’ as unattached free agents. As for Fanny, the closest she comes to having a family is young Georges (whom she rejects) and the little girl who latches onto her as messenger (and is brutally maimed for her troubles).

5 *Comédie classique* is a key exception to this first cycle rule, representing Paris in iconic detail.

6 See Sheringham (2009) for an illuminating meditation on the intertextual use to which NDiaye puts Bordeaux’s geography in this novel.

7 This opportunity to – as it were – call a spade a spade, is given its fullest expression in the short story ‘Les Sœurs’ (2008).

8 For an excellent analysis of these corporeal phenomena, especially with reference to *Trois femmes puissantes*, see Parent (2013b).

9 Once again, Lucie resembles Fanny’s mother in *En famille*, a woman who is constantly tired and cheerful, except when she becomes inexplicably angry and energetic enough to berate and disown her sexually, racially and physically abused daughter.

10 For a remarkably sensitive reading of *Rosie Carpe*, from the perspective of Maurice Blanchot’s ‘writing of disaster’ and Cathy Caruth’s and Dori Laub’s conceptions of ‘trauma’, see Arnould-Bloomfield (2013).

11 See also Cottille-Foley (2006a) on the specificity of *Rosie Carpe* in NDiaye’s writing of amnesia and the ‘non-lieu’.

12 The opening line of García Márquez’s novel is ‘Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice’ (García Márquez, 2000: 1).

13 While it is true that there is no obvious ‘collective trauma’ holocaust or colonialism paradigm through which to filter Rosie’s interrupted subjectivity,

genealogy and radical memory loss, the novel's partial setting in formerly enslaved Guadeloupe may, it might be argued, be 'infecting' her consciousness. Sarah Burnautzki raises this idea in an unpublished article.

14 The colour green will be made to do something similar in *Autoportrait en vert*.

15 For an account of the whole bizarre event, see Harang (2004), as well as Cendrey's testimonial novel *Les Jouets vivants* (2005).

16 This scenario is, of course, a knowing or unknowing (as always, with NDiaye, it is impossible to tell) reworking of Freud's notorious 'Dora' case study, in which the teenage Dora and her father are placed in a potential pairing situation with the married couple Herr and Frau K.

17 I am grateful to Pauline Eaton for our intense discussion of this passage, which really focused my own attention on it, even if we reached different conclusions.

18 See Winnicott (1960), Green (1983), Armstrong-Perlman (1994).

19 It is fascinating too to note how readily readers 'blank out' NDiaye's horrors: very little mention is ever made by critics of Titi's terrible suffering prior to his arrival in Guadeloupe.

20 Unstable teachers are legion in NDiaye's world, accounting for a significant proportion of her protagonists (e.g. Herman, Zelnor, Nadia, Ange, Rudy, Fanta, the narrator of 'Tous mes amis' and the child-raping Maître in *Les Grandes Personnes*). For an excellent extended analysis of the teacher-figure in NDiaye, see Sheringham (2013b). NDiaye's mother was a teacher.

21 In the final moments of Romero's film, Ben will, of course, be shot dead by a posse of redneck law-enforcers who apparently mistake him for a zombie. The ending of *Rosie Carpe* is almost as bleak for Lagrand. Classic American horror films from 1968 appear to have influenced *Rosie Carpe* enormously. Sarah Burnautzki (2013b) points out striking resonances between NDiaye's novel and Roman Polanski's film version of Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*. More motifs from *Rosemary's Baby* (e.g. an intrusively nourishing neighbour whose food causes the heroine to become supernaturally pregnant) can be found in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*.

22 Pauline Eaton points out, in an unpublished paper, that the trappings of *vodun*, a Caribbean religion associated with ontological transformation, shape-shifting and zombification, are to be found everywhere in this novel.

23 For a fascinating meditation on what may be at stake in NDiaye's briefly 'fantastical' rendering of Lagrand's and Rosie's psychic interactions, see Arnould-Bloomfield (2013).

24 For an excellent sociological account of the phenomenon of 'passing' – a stigmatized subject's attempt to 'pass' as a non-stigmatized one – see Goffman (1963). The specifically racialized version of the phenomenon has been thoroughly explored in American literature in such works as Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929), William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932),

Langston Hughes's short story 'Passing' (in the 1934 collection *The Ways of White Folks*) and, more recently, in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000). NDiaye's 2013 novel *Ladivine* represents NDiaye's most explicit exploration of the 'passing' motif, one which has haunted her writing since *En famille*.

25 It is interesting to note the extent to which the ending of *Rosie Carpe* feels inappropriately 'nasty', while the ending of *Mon cœur à l'étroit* feels astonishingly hopeful. In the first case, the chosen denouement feels like an unreasonable nightmare, in the second a redemptive and reassuring dream.

26 Christophe Ippolito pointed out the Flaubert connection during his paper 'Trois contes de Flaubert dans *Trois femmes puissantes* de NDiaye' at the 20th- and 21st-century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium in Atlanta in 2013, noting that Norah's story is linked to 'Hérodiades' via the theme of the incestuous step-mother and the sacrificed male saint, that Rudy's story connects to 'La Légende de St Julien L'Hospitalier' through its medieval preoccupations and murderous inter-generational curses, while the maid Khady Demba's simple soul, prone to hallucination, makes her the modern African equivalent of Flaubert's Félicité. We can draw out similar parallels between each of NDiaye's characters and each of Vieux-Chauvet's. Norah the neurotic *métisse* has strong echoes of Claire in Vieux-Chauvet's 'Amour', her menacing father an avatar of the terrifying Calédu; pseudo-intellectual Rudy has the same quality of paranoid derangement as Vieux-Chauvet's male poet protagonist René in 'Folie', while Khady Demba's fantastical capacity for surviving limitless sexual violence with her soul unscathed connects her to young Rose in Vieux-Chauvet's 'Amour'. I am grateful to Naomi Segal for pointing out to me the clear, ironic connection to yet another classic triptych of short story-novellas: Simone de Beauvoir's *La Femme rompue* (1967).

27 The conference 'Marie NDiaye: une femme puissante', held in Mannheim, Germany in May 2011, was a significant turning point in NDiaye studies, bringing together for the first time a number of highly politicized critiques of NDiaye's 'recuperation' within contemporary French culture. The combination of papers by Behar, Burnautzki, Moudileno and others provoked difficult and exciting discussions which have immeasurably influenced my thoughts on NDiaye's *cultural function*.

28 According to NDiaye (Bourmeau, 2009), 'elles ont ce que j'appellerais une force intérieure [...] j'aurais pu aussi appeler le livres *Des femmes fortes*, mais c'était moins bien'.

Chapter Three

1 This second claim is not quite true: in 1972, the mixed-race French actor Georges Aminel played Oedipus in a production by Jean-Paul Roussillon. The casting decision was heavily criticized by contemporary critics, and Aminel

was replaced by a white actor, before resigning from the Comédie-Française (Chalaye, 2007). Shortly before retiring from the theatre altogether, in 1979, he told *Le Figaro's* Marion Thébaud: 'Je suis trop blanc, trop noir, le cheveu trop crépu ou pas assez. Bref, des amis qui me veulent du bien me demandent pourquoi je ne joue pas Othello mais jamais pourquoi je n'interprète pas Macbeth' (quoted by Chalaye, 2007). Aminel's problem is not so different, as we have seen, from some of the cultural quandaries raised by Marie NDiaye's own career.

2 *Hilda* remains by far the most performed of all the plays, having, at the time of writing, been produced almost thirty times in France, and also several times across Europe and the United States. The second most frequently produced of NDiaye's plays seems to be *Rien d'humain* (six French productions and one in the US), while *Papa doit manger*, interestingly, seems to be one of the least popular (it is worth noting, perhaps, that it is the only one of the plays to demand the presence of 'black' and 'mixed-race' actors).

3 Quoted in the Comédie-Française programme for *Papa doit manger*, January 2003.

4 Guila Clara Kessous gave papers in London and Oxford in April 2007 entitled '*Hilda* de Marie Ndiaye ou l'esclavage moderne au théâtre', drawing on her 2005 US production of the play, in which the central power dynamic was interpreted as a black–white one.

5 It is possible that NDiaye is here commenting on the contemporary vogue for 'tell-all' autobiographies and perhaps even the particularly French love for 'transgressive' authors of 'autofiction' (e.g. Hervé Guibert, Christine Angot). It is always difficult to gauge NDiaye's position vis-à-vis the relationship between her life and her writing. Usually insisting on an absolute separation between the two (see interview in Asibong and Jordan, 2009), on occasions (see interview with Paula Jacques on the CD in Rabaté, 2008) she admits to clear connections between her fiction and her life.

6 'O mon corps, fais de moi toujours un homme qui interroge!' is the final sentence of *Peau noire masques blancs* (Fanon, 1952).

7 A number of scholarly articles are, however, beginning to explore the 'race question' with nuance and lucidity: see in particular Sheringham (2007), Ducournau (2009), Behar (2013) and Burnautzki (2013a).

8 This is taken from the programme of the 2003 Comédie-Française production.

9 For further discussion of the concept of 'toxic shame', see Woodhead (2009: 195–7).

10 Something similar happens among the frustrated female characters of Lorca's 1936 play *Casa de Bernarda Alba* via their discussion of the male (and ultimately murdered) fantasy-receptacle that is Pepe el Romano.

11 Classical (and neo-classical) references abound in this play, as they do throughout NDiaye's work. The evil mother-son duo of Agrippina and

Nero is evoked by the relationship between Mme Diss and the ogre. Anchises and Aeneas spring to mind during Mme Diss's voyage 'on the back' of her daughter-in-law France. And Racine's version of *Iphigénie* seems to hover somewhere in the shadows, his substitute sacrificial victim Ériphile dimly perceptible via the replacement of France by Nancy.

12 Jacques Rivette's 1974 film *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* contains at its heart a similar haunted house/child-rescuing challenge, also played out as a kind of game, and also involving two interchangeable young women. It might be argued that the child-rescuing fantasy hovers over the whole of NDiaye's textual world, the narratives themselves functioning as attempts to imagine/enact successful rescues such as the one Lagrand exceptionally manages with Titi.

13 A similarly 'blank' identity swap takes place between the narrator and the unhappy Chinese wife in NDiaye's short story 'Un voyage' (1997).

14 The sale and spectacularization of representations of trauma and suffering are, as in *Providence*, a key preoccupation of this play, and open up potential dialogue with a number of contemporary ethical-aesthetic questions, from Holocaust and plantation cinema to the life and death of photographer Kevin Carter, who committed suicide after taking a Pulitzer prize-winning picture of a starving Sudanese child.

15 Djamila means 'beautiful' in Arabic, just as Bella does in Italian, and so the two NDiayan friends are, once again, a pair of pseudo-twins.

16 It is perhaps worth noting that the play was published in the year when NDiaye would finally leave behind the Lindon dynasty represented by Les Éditions de Minuit, her pseudo-paternal saviour Jérôme Lindon having died in 2001 and his daughter Irène having taken the business over, leaving the sons Vincent and Mathieu to pursue their careers of actor and writer respectively. Mathieu Lindon devotes a chapter of his book *Je vous écris* (Lindon, 2004) to an analysis of NDiaye's work.

17 For a discussion of *White Material* in the context of Claire Denis's filmmaking, see Asibong (2011). It would clearly be pertinent also to consider the script within the context of NDiaye's writing, but space does not allow for such an exploration here.

18 For an excellently robust critique of this key turning point in the history of psychoanalysis, see Masson (1997).

19 For further exploration of the child's psychic vulnerability to unassimilable adult objects, see Laplanche (1999) on 'implantation' and 'intromission'.

20 I am reminded of Michel Chion's (2001) unexpected citation of Françoise Dolto, who memorably describes Baby as Mother's 'premier psychotérapeute' (quoted by Chion in the epigraph to his book on the filmmaker David Lynch).

Chapter Four

1 While it is understandable that her adopted city of Berlin provokes NDiaye to allude to the Holocaust, it is interesting that she does not tend to discuss her birthplace, Pithiviers in France – the site of one of the largest internment camps for French Jews and other victims of the Nazis – in the context of racialized persecution. That said, *En famille* could be interpreted as just such a textual yoking of Pithiviers to genocide.

2 Samuel Beckett, himself in analysis with Wilfred Bion, and having attended one of Jung's lectures at the Tavistock Clinic, is reported (Connor, 1998) to have been deeply marked by Jung's phrase, which inspired elements of many of his subsequent works.

3 For fascinating studies of *La Naufragée*, see Termite (2009) and Inglin-Routisseau (2010). Both pay attention to the function of Turner's paintings in this book in a way that space here does not allow me. I will say, however, that the first time I met Marie NDiaye and Jean-Yves Cendrey was in London in 2006, and that their only request was to visit the Turner collection at Tate Britain.

4 It is given a new twist in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, of course, in which boyfriends Ralph and Lanton have their relationship sexually intruded upon by Ralph's mother Nadia.

5 It is worth noting that the very fact of *ressemblance* in NDiaye's world – think of Brulard's spitefully youthful doppelgangers, Rudy Descas's mockingly phallic statue, or even of the writer Marie Darrieussecq – accused by NDiaye (1998) of the cardinal sin of 'singerie' – is almost always fake, insubstantial and strangely contemptuous.

6 See Delvaux and Herd (2007), Barnet (2009b), Jordan (2009), Connon (2009), Motte (2012), Parent (2013a) and Ruhe (2013). These studies are crucial for a more thorough understanding of this endlessly fascinating book, which I have only been able to approach from a limited perspective here, especially insofar as they pay careful attention to the various functions of the photographs, both those by Julie Ganzin and those from the anonymous collection.

7 There are many details that are 'wrong', of course: this narrator has more children than NDiaye, two sisters on her mother's side rather than a brother, and a father living in Burkina Faso instead of Senegal.

8 Cornelia Ruhe (2013) writes compellingly of the relationship between the photographs' frequently blurry quality and the aesthetic of epistemological uncertainty cultivated à la Todorov in all NDiaye's texts. I would add that if one of the key anxieties captured by NDiaye in this text is the way in which children's testimony vis-à-vis phenomenological reality is discredited by adults, the discrepancy between minoritarian and majoritarian (racialized) experience is also spectrally present, as usual.

9 These are Tante's words to young Z in *Quant au riche avenir* (80) as she tells him that she always makes sure to look out for children in danger, even ones that she does not know personally.

10 The middle solution, the disappearance of the hooves, seems to me ethically problematic in the context of a children's story. Why should the protagonists' physical 'difference' have to vanish in order for them to find happiness and peace?

11 Odilon's realization of his sister Prunelle's sudden psychic 'disappearance' is reminiscent of Lazare's observation regarding his own sister Rosie at the climax of *Rosie Carpe*: 'Je ne sais pas, dit Lazare. C'était quelque chose d'indescriptible dont elle était pénétrée maintenant et qui était cause, peut-être, que je ne la reconnaissait pas, mais quelque chose qui interdisait qu'on soit, avec elle, au plus près' (RC, 362).

12 'Materteral' is the female equivalent of 'avuncular'. It is an adjective worth knowing if one is in NDiaye's world, one in which aunts proliferate queerly.

13 See Fairbairn (1952), Guntrip (1968) and Armstrong-Perlman (1994) on the ways in which the allure of bad internal objects results in extreme difficulty for the child to let go of them.

Conclusion

1 NDiaye has made no secret of her admiration for the films of David Lynch, mentioning her fantasy of having her fiction adapted by Lynch, in an interview with Shirley Jordan and me in London in 2007.

2 I am invoking here some of the terminology of the mystically orientated French philosopher Christian Jambet. For a useful overview of Jambet's thought, see Hallward (2003). Hallward's (2001) discussion of the twelfth-century Islamic mystical philosopher al-Suhrawardi's theory of the '*alam al-mithal*' (translated by French philosopher Henry Corbin as the *mundus imaginalis* or 'monde imaginal'), provides another useful set of concepts evoking the idea of a zone *between* the blank or crypt-like world and its radically enlightened beyond, in which the subject can nevertheless dwell, survive and relate. These mystical frameworks seem to me to be just as instructive for a reading of NDiaye as the psychotherapeutic ones I have mostly invoked in the course of this study (although Bion's concept of 'O' might be argued to bridge the two domains).

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