University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of Modern Languages

Republican Universalism and the Intersectional Othering and Oppression of Ethnic Minority Women in the Novels of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2021

University of Southampton

Abstract

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This thesis offers the first comparison of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's novels and, in particular, their portrayals of ethnic minority women in France in relation to republican universalism. It examines how the authors' ethnic minority female characters face racist and sexist discrimination and oppression in French society even though it prides itself upon being the home of universal human rights. By applying an original intersectional framework based on the works of Sara Ahmed to a selection of Lê and NDiaye's works, this research demonstrates, firstly, that such divisions and inequalities are linked to the way the characters are reductively racialised and gendered, and, secondly, how this is a legacy of French colonialism. Additionally, it illuminates how this intersectional othering and oppression do not occur just *in spite* of republican universalism and its promises of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, but are often channelled and concealed *through* its discourses, especially those of abstraction and integration. It exposes the complex and self-perpetuating nature of the power relations depicted as the protagonists internalise, and consequently become complicit with, unequal social hierarchies. In light of how NDiaye and Lê elucidate this process, employing literary tools such as imagery, allegory, intertextuality and the fantastic, this thesis argues that their novels stimulate an intersectional feminist consciousness. This is a consciousness of not only the experiences of ethnic minority women in France but also how these are imbricated in broader power structures and is therefore central to our ability to seek out new avenues and futures in which *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* can be universally enacted. This thesis thus contributes to the fields of feminist and postcolonial studies as well as to knowledge on the authors works' specifically by shedding light on how republican universalist discourses can conceal and perpetuate discrimination and inequality in French society and how literature can explore and challenge this issue.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Alison Marmont

Title of thesis: Republican Universalism and the Intersectional Othering and Oppression of Ethnic Minority Women in the Novels of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

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Signature: AJMarmont Date: 25/09/2021

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has enabled and supported me to undertake this thesis. Firstly, I express my utmost gratitude to my supervisors Dr Aude Campmas, Dr Scott Soo and Dr Helen Vassallo for all of their feedback, encouragement and unwavering commitment over the last few years. I am indebted to the University of Southampton and the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership for funding this project and believing in its value.

I would like to thank the other academics, including Dr Eleanor King and Dr Vivienne Orchard, who have been so generous with their time and advice during my PhD. Equally, I am grateful to fellow doctoral researchers and the groups and associations that helped make this such an enriching process, including the Modern Languages Research Group and The Transnational Studies Centre at Southampton and the ASMCF and SFPS. Thank you to Dr Greg Kerr and Professor Jennifer Yee at the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford, respectively, whose support during my Undergraduate and Master's Degrees paved the way for this thesis and inspired my choice of authors. I also extend my thanks to the Graduate Office staff for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities who have helped to keep things running smoothly so I could focus on my research.

To all of my friends who have supported me through their kindness and prayers over the last few years, thank you. Last but not least, I cannot express my gratitude towards my husband, Jonathan, my parents and my best friend, Sophie. I thank you all for inspiring and encouraging me and for giving me your thoughts and feedback on my ideas and writing.

Introduction

Republican Universalism and Intersectional Discrimination and Inequality in the novels of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê

Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê, two critically acclaimed authors, first entered the French literary scene with their debut publications in 1985 and 1986, respectively. Since then, they have published more than forty novels and short stories between them and NDiaye has been awarded the Prix Marguerite-Yourcenar 2020 and Lê the Prix littéraire Prince Pierre de Monaco 2019 for their overall *œuvres*. The authors repeatedly return to issues of discrimination and inequality and the impact that these have on their characters' lives, many of whom are ethnic minority women either born in or having migrated to France. NDiaye and Lê's works depict how these women are often financially and sexually exploited, socially marginalised, and discriminated against because of their gender and origins, regardless of nationality. The authors also explore these themes in relation to the ideas of the universal and the particular. On the one hand, NDiaye and Lê's novels reveal how such inequalities are often perpetuated by those who employ, implicitly or explicitly, the discourses of republican universalism central to the French motto and principles of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. On the other hand, whilst depicting this process and the experiences of ethnic minority female characters, the narratives, in Lê's words, 's'efforcent d'atteindre à l'universel'.[1] Their works therefore encourage reflection on both an ideology that has shaped French society since the Revolution and the gap that exists between the ideals of republican universalism and its enactment in the lives of ethnic minority women in France.[2]

The ongoing significance of republican universalism in French society is evident in Prime Minister Jean Castex's expansion upon the historical 'devise républicaine' in his announcement of a 'projet de loi confortant les principes républicains' in 2020:

> Ces principes, c'est notamment le respect de la dignité humaine, celui de la liberté d'expression, de penser, de prier, l'égalité entre tous et particulièrement entre les

[1] Sabine Loucif, 'Entretien avec Linda Lê ', *The French Review,* 80 (2007) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25480807> [accessed 30/03/2020] (p.883). Although Marie NDiaye does not make a similar explicit statement, this thesis and previous research demonstrate how the author and her works challenge the failures of republican universalism but uphold the idea of universalist abstraction. See Laura Bea Jensen, 'Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France: Marie NDiaye and Bessora', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 2017).

[2] This thesis explores how republican universalism is often integrated into a nationalist framework in France and the negative implications of this process. In order to distinguish between this kind of discourse and a non-exclusionary understanding of universalism, the former is referred to as "republican universalism" or "(republican) universalist" whilst the latter is expressed as "universal".

> femmes et les hommes, les droits, de l'enfant notamment, à l'éducation, et plus généralement le refus des comportements dégradants.[3]

The introduction of this bill attests to the fact that republican universalism continues to be seen by many as integral to the French nation and French identity as it is 'taken to be the defining trait of the French republic, its most enduring value, its most precious asset'.[4] Then again, the fact that it requires 'reinforcement' or 'strengthening' conveys that these ideals are not always adhered to in France; as such, it is important to examine how and why this is the case. As the failure of many of the ideals mentioned by Castex is central to NDiaye and Lê's depictions of their ethnic minority female characters, their novels can shed light on issues such as human dignity, gender equality and freedom of expression. As the first analysis to bring together NDiaye and Lê's novels, this thesis will illuminate their explorations of ethnic minority women's experiences in France and how these are shaped by republican universalism. This is achieved through the application of a theoretical framework based on intersectionality; which emerged as an approach from the 1980s onwards in the works of Black and Latina American feminists such as Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldúa and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term.[5] This project, therefore, adopts a non-essentialist understanding of categories such as sex, ethnicity and class as 'interlocking, mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power' to examine the portrayal of these social constructions in the novels and their material impact on the characters' lives.[6] In particular, employing Sara Ahmed's intersectional notion of feminist consciousness elucidates how the works expose and subvert not only the existence and repercussions of gendered and racialised social hierarchies in French society but also how they can be reproduced through republican universalist discourses.[7]

To demonstrate the relevance, originality and timeliness of this thesis, the introduction sets out the rationale for comparing these two authors' works and the corpus selected. It subsequently outlines this project's main arguments about how NDiaye and Lê's novels stimulate an intersectional feminist consciousness of the ways in which republican universalist discourses

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[3] Jean Castex, 'Présentation du projet de loi confortant les principes républicains', *Gouvernement,* (09/12/2020) <https://www.gouvernement.fr/partage/11944-presentation-du-projet-de-loi-confortant-les-principes-republicains> [accessed 06/01/2021].

[4] Joan W. Scott, 'French Universalism in the Nineties', in *Women and Citizenship,* ed. by Marilyn Friedman (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 35-51 (p.35).

[5] See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* 1989:1 (1989); Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, (London: Women's Press, 1982); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987/1999). For an in-depth account of the development of intersectionality see Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

[6] Collins and Bilge (2016), p.27.

[7] See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2010), p.86.

can perpetuate gender and race-based discrimination and inequality.[8] This highlights how concepts ostensibly meant to safeguard and promote equality, especially abstraction and integration, are portrayed as contributing to intersectional social hierarchies in French society. The literature review then considers previous research into these issues and their lacunae, along with the most relevant aspects of republican universalism and intersectionality theory to establish the contribution this work makes to existing research on the authors' novels and the fields of postcolonial and feminist studies more generally. Finally, I summarise how the thesis arguments are developed through the intersectional theoretical frameworks applied in the three literary analysis chapters.

The Intersections of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's Writing

Although the works of these two contemporary authors have not yet been analysed together, there are various synergies between their novels that can make such a comparison fruitful. Firstly, as noted above, they were first published in the mid-80s when prominent and often contentious debates about republican universalist ideals and their enactment were taking place in France.[9] Secondly, there are multiple themes relevant to republican universalism that are pivotal to both novelists' *œuvres*; namely the violence and injustices involved in social division, their impact and how they are negotiated. NDiaye explains her own desire to explore violence and social suffering, which she describes as 'la matière lourde, engluante, prosaïque de la vie ordinaire et tout ce que celle-ci recèle de fureur et de démence', through writing characterised by 'étrangeté', 'inquiétude' and 'amabilité'.[10] Meanwhile, Lê embraces Ingeborg Bachman's statement that 'Les yeux doivent être dessillés': arguing that 'we must not remain indifferent to the injustices of the world'.[11] Accordingly, she seeks to unmask lies, depravity and hypocrisy 'so as not to get stuck in the lie, or in certain ways of thinking, so as not to flee the cruelties of reality'.[12]

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[8] The concepts of abstraction and integration within republican universalist discourses are set out in the section 'Abstraction and Integration' in the literature review. Further, although Ahmed does not employ the term 'intersectional' when speaking about 'feminist consciousness', this thesis refers to it as 'intersectional feminist consciousness' throughout as her conception of feminism is based upon intersectionality.

[9] These debates are considered in the section 'Abstraction and Integration'. Linda Lê, *Cronos*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2010); Linda Lê, 'L'Encrier', in *Autres jeux avec le feu,* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2002).

[10] Marie NDiaye, 'Hanter par les mots la réalité la plus palpable : extraits de l'intervention de Marie NDiaye aux Assises internationales du roman', *Libération,* (03/11/2009) <https://next.liberation.fr/livres/2009/11/03/hanter-par-les-mots-la-realite-la-plus-palpable_591535> [accessed 20/08/2020].

[11] Quoted in Argand (01/04/1999); An analysis of the intertextuality of her works with those of Ingeborg Bachmann is offered in Alexandra Kurmann, *Intertextual Weaving in the Work of Linda Lê: Imagining the Ideal Reader*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016); Leslie Barnes, 'Literature and the Outsider: An Interview with Linda Lê', *World Literature Today,* 82:3 (2008).

[12] Quoted in Argand (01/04/1999); Barnes (2008).

The evidence of this outlook in Lê's works can be seen in novels such as *Cronos* (2010), which depicts the violence, hatred and misogyny given full expression through political tyranny in a dystopian Asian country. Meanwhile, 'L'Encrier' in *Autres jeux avec le feu* (2002) portrays the virulent racism and sexism that fuel the murder of an immigrant woman in France.[13] *Lettre morte* (1999) and *Les aubes* (2000) expose the abuse pervading intimate relationships in which partners attempt to control, exploit and manipulate their lovers.[14] For example, whilst the wife in *Les aubes* tries to use her superior socio-economic position to control her impoverished husband, his sexism reveals itself in his desire to humiliate and subordinate her. Even relationships which appear more caring are unmasked as being shaped by divisive beliefs and attitudes. In *Lame de fond* (2012), the love between Lou and Van, from France and Vietnam respectively, is undermined by not only Lou's murder of Van because of his adultery but also the revelation that she may have married him because of her unconscious desire to challenge her racist mother.[15] In Lê's most recent novel, *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien* (2020), the French husband's paternalism and controlling behaviour belie his supposed respect for and idolatry of his Vietnamese wife.[16] This, along with his sense of entitlement expressed in his long-term affair with another woman, are seen by his daughter as evidence of the hypocrisy of the republican universalist values of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* that he regularly professes. Division as a result of othering is also explored in relation to exiled writers. In *Calomnies* (1993) and *Voix* (1998), the exiled Vietnamese authors portrayed are pressed into writing on certain subjects because of their origins and belittled for having alternative aspirations.[17] In the case of *Voix*, this oppressive atmosphere compounds the protagonist's own sense of guilt at having left her recently deceased father in Vietnam and reaches its paroxysm in extreme paranoia and her voluntary internment in a psychiatric hospital.

The violent othering of characters is central to NDiaye's novels such as *La naufragée* (1999).[18] When a 'femme-poisson' washes up on the banks of the Seine in what is depicted as the early 1800s, she is either exploited as an exotic commodity or threatened with violence by the French population who conceive her hybrid body and entrancing song as a danger to them.[19] In modern-day France, Fanny in *En famille* (1990) is never explicitly racialised but is marginalised, raped and

[13] This short story is analysed in Chapter One.
[14] Linda Lê, *Lettre morte*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1999); Linda Lê, *Les aubes*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2000).
[15] Linda Lê, *Lame de fond*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois éditeur, 2012).
[16] Linda Lê, *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien*, (Paris: Stock, 2020).
[17] Linda Lê, *Calomnies*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1993); Linda Lê, *Voix*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1998).
[18] Marie NDiaye, *La naufragée*, (Charenton: Éditions Flohic, 1999).
[19] The *femme-poisson*'s experiences can be seen to offer an allegorical reflection on those of Sara Baartman, who was also exposed as an exotic commodity at around the same time in France.

excluded by her French family, and financially and sexually exploited.[20] In *Mon cœur à l'étroit* (2007), Nadia is associated with an unnamed difference and faces discrimination, verbal abuse and assault which lead her to flee the country whilst the murder of Malinka in *Ladivine* (2013) appears to be the result of her partner's racism and sexism.[21] Integration, a process often presented as key to maintaining republican universalist ideals, is also portrayed as violent for those produced as outsiders. In *Un temps de saison* (1994), the Parisian Herman is told to assimilate into the rural community in which his family have disappeared in order to find them, only to dissolve as a result of this process.[22] Similarly, Fanny's attempt to integrate into her family ultimately leads to her disintegration. The othering and oppression of marginalised characters also leads to further division throughout NDiaye's novels. The exploitation and abuse Rosie faces in *Rosie Carpe* (2001) at the hands of her parents, brother and lover are triggers for her attempted abandonment and murder of her own son.[23] Likewise, Fanny, Nadia and Malinka's desire to personally avoid racism incompatible with universalist abstraction from group affiliations leads to them abusing other minorities, in the case of Fanny and Nadia, or abandoning their ethnic minority families, in the case of Nadia and Malinka.

In this way, Lê and NDiaye's *œuvres* reflect on the violence involved in marginalisation and inequality and how this may not be incompatible with republican universalist discourses and practices; even if it is contrary to universalist ideals. Located within this broader exploration of othering, injustice and republican universalism, they often portray how ethnic minority women in particular negotiate such problems. Examining the authors' works in tandem can thus elucidate the similarities and differences between their depictions of ethnic minority women's experiences and, simultaneously, of discrimination, inequality and republican universalism more generally. This is especially relevant given the different origins of their ethnic minority female characters which often reflect the writers' own backgrounds.

Marie NDiaye was born in 1967 to a French mother and Senegalese father who, after their divorce, returned to Senegal when she was one. Her mother brought her up in Bourg-la-Reine along with her brother, Pap, a prominent anti-racist historian who was recently appointed as the director of the *Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration*. NDiaye began writing at a young age and had *Quant au riche avenir* (1984) published with Les Éditions de Minuit whilst she was still at

[20] Marie NDiaye, *En famille*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990/2007).
[21] Marie NDiaye, *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2007); Marie NDiaye, *Ladivine*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).
[22] Marie NDiaye, *Un temps de saison*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1994/2004).
[23] Marie NDiaye, *Rosie Carpe*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2001/2009).

school to great acclaim.[24] Throughout her writing career she has been granted, among other awards, the Prix Femina for *Rosie Carpe* and the Prix Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009).[25] She has also written children's books and plays and is the only living female playwright to have a work included in the Comédie-Française with *Papa doit manger* (2003).[26]

Linda Lê was born in 1963 in Da Lat, Vietnam, and her childhood was shaped by both the country's colonial history and the Vietnam War and Communism. As the daughter of a naturalised French and Francophile mother, she and her sisters attended French schools in Da Lat and then Saigon. She gained a passion for French literature and language which continued after she and her family, with the exception of her father, fled to Le Havre to escape the communist regime in Vietnam in 1977. After moving to Paris, she began writing works of fiction and published her first novel, *Un si tendre vampire*, in 1986.[27] She has received various literary prizes throughout her career including the Prix Fénéon for *Les trois parques* (1997) and the Prix Wepler for *Cronos* (2010).[28] She has published various non-fiction works including literary essays and reflections on her own experiences such as *Le complexe de Caliban* (2005) and *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas* (2011), which received the Prix Renaudot poche.[29]

Although their novels are not autobiographical, Lê's ethnic minority female characters are most commonly Asian migrants, whilst those of NDiaye tend to have African origins and are often born in France. In light of their origins, comparing NDiaye and Lê's works can illuminate, rather than level, the convergences and divergences in the experiences of women with differing ethnic origins.Such an analysis will highlight how, in spite of the authors' and characters' varying backgrounds, the novels paint a similar picture of French society as divided and inegalitarian as a result of pervasive and intersectional racism and sexism. Additionally, a awareness of the authors' experiences can be used to draw attention to potential synergies with their literary depictions. By relating how the texts reflect the kinds of power relations involved in, for example, the way that Lê and NDiaye are treated during or after interviews, this thesis illustrates the relevance of analysing these literary works to gain insights into the functioning of such power relations in French society and the experiences of ethnic minority women.

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[24] Alexandre Fillon, 'Les généalogies de Marie NDiaye ', *L'Express,* (02/03/2013) <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/les-genealogies-de-marie-ndiaye_1221965.html> [accessed 22/01/2021].
[25] Marie NDiaye, *Trois femmes puissantes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
[26] Marie NDiaye, *Papa doit manger*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003).
[27] Linda Lê, *Un si tendre vampire*, (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1987).
[28] Linda Lê, *Les trois parques*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois éditeur, 1997).
[29] Linda Lê, *Le complexe de Caliban*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2005); Linda Lê, *A l'enfant que je n'aurai pas*, (Kindle ebook: Nil, 2011) [accessed 21/09/2021].

Another reason for selecting these two authors, and for focusing on their portrayal of ethnic minority women, is linked to one of the main aims of intersectionality and, consequently, this thesis: demarginalisation. Intersectional research has often identified not only the complex and multifaceted nature of oppression but also the implications of this in feminist and anti-racist activism. Crenshaw outlines how typical analyses of racist or sexist oppression as 'mutually exclusive' in these movements mean the voices, experiences and needs of ethnic minority women are often neglected within both.[30] In this vein, single-axis approaches overlooking the intersectional nature of systems of domination may place ethnic minority women into a 'double bind' in which they experience both sexism and racism and this is unlikely to be recognised and challenged. As my analysis of the socio-political context will demonstrate, including in relation to republican universalism, this is an issue also affecting ethnic minority women in France. By illuminating the depiction of intersectional discrimination and the silencing involved in *En famille* and *Mon cœur à l'étroit* by NDiaye and 'L'Encrier', *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot* (1995) by Lê, my own research reveals how the authors centralise the experiences and voices of peripheralised characters. This thesis adopts a similar demarginalising approach through its comparison of the works of two ethnic minority female writers and its engagement with theories and concepts developed by ethnic minority women, such as Ahmed and Crenshaw.[31] In order to subvert as well as unmask the complex and intersectional power relations examined it thus centralises the experiences, literature, thinking and research of those more likely to be overlooked or silenced.

Creating an Intersectional Feminist Consciousness: The Literary Exposure and Subversion of Discriminatory and Oppressive Mechanisms within Republican Universalism

Applying an intersectional and demarginalising theoretical framework to analyse Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's novels makes it possible to develop several significant arguments about their portrayals of ethnic minority women and republican universalism. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the ideals of republican universalism, such as those outlined by Castex, are not systematically adhered to in France.[32] In particular, the 'dignité humaine' of ethnic minority female characters is undermined by racist and sexist discourses and practices, including 'des comportements dégradants' of which they are regularly the victims.[33] This reveals that the

[30] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review,* 43:6 (1991), p.1241.
[31] This is particularly important given my own relatively privileged position as a white, middle-class woman.
[32] See Castex (09/12/2020).
[33] Ibid.

practice of abstraction – presented as a central aspect of republican universalism that prevents discrimination by 'abstracting' individuals from identity-based categorisations such as sex or ethnicity – is not enacted in French society. In turn, this intersectional discrimination is accompanied by attempts to control these women which deny them their right to equality, fraternity and freedom, including of expression and even thought. Integration, which is intended to promote equality and fraternity among all citizens by forging a national identity based on shared values rather than exclusionary communities, is also not achieved as those who are racialised and gendered are treated as inferior.[34] As a result, Lê and NDiaye's novels depict how specific concepts and practices within republican universalist discourses, namely abstraction and integration, fail to ensure that universalist ideals are upheld in France.

The authors' employment of literary tools such as imagery, intertextuality, allegory and mirroring also connects the everyday experiences of violence, discrimination and oppression that the ethnic minority female characters face to larger intersecting structures of subordination in France. As a result, these novels share the rejection within intersectional approaches of 'neoliberal pressures to focus on individual and personal causes of social inequality' to instead elucidate the interconnections between subjective experiences and structural and 'interlocking oppressions'.[35] The works considered adopt similar techniques to signal that such inegalitarian systems are the legacy of the French nation's imperial and slave-trading past. Thus, this thesis exposes how the novelists' *œuvres* shed light on not only the specific experiences of ethnic minority women but also the power relations which shape postcolonial French society as a whole. It argues that NDiaye and Lê's portrayals of ethnic minority women reveal the existence of gendered and racialised social hierarchies in French society incompatible with universalist ideals and the negative impact these have upon ethnic minority women in particular.

Furthermore, this research problematises the idea that inegalitarian social hierarchies occur simply 'in spite of' republican universalism. Instead, it argues that NDiaye and Lê depict how republican universalist discourses such as abstraction and integration can be employed to conceal and perpetuate discrimination and inequality in the Hexagon. The novels convey how the superficial respect of abstraction, evident in the way that ethnic majority characters avoid assigning explicitly race or ethnic-based labels to those who are minoritised, facilitates

[34] The concepts and practices of abstraction and integration and their relevance to the novels are explored further in the section 'Abstraction and Integration'.
[35] Collins and Bilge (2016), pp.76-77, 189. A good example of this kind of intersectional approach can be seen in Crenshaw's research on rape and the legal system. She demonstrates how an individual black woman's traumatic experience of rape by a white man in the U.S. is linked to power relations, social discourses and judicial systems produced through patriarchal and white supremacist structures. See Crenshaw (1989), p.158.

discrimination by masking it and subsequently making it hard for those affected to resist it. Lê and NDiaye also explore how the idea of integration - as an allegedly demarginalising process offering access to the universalist rights of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* - allows ethnic majority characters to surreptitiously and oppressively direct the thoughts, attitudes and behaviour of ethnic minority women. By illustrating the deceptive nature of republican universalist discourses and promises, the authors underline the challenges of resistance as their protagonists can easily become complicit in the inferiorisation and oppression they face.

Finally, this thesis proposes that NDiaye and Lê's portrayals of ethnic minority women's experiences can facilitate an intersectional feminist consciousness. Ahmed describes her conception of a feminist consciousness as follows: 'Feminist consciousness can be thought of as consciousness of the violence and power concealed under the languages of civility, happiness, and love, rather than simply or only consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility'.[36] In other words, an intersectional feminist consciousness involves an awareness of how violent power relations are reproduced through discourses that may appear harmless, liberating, egalitarian or even in the best interests of those who are minoritised. NDiaye and Lê employ a variety of narrative tools to foster awareness of how the languages of republican universalism, including abstraction and integration, can camouflage and contribute to restrictive gendered and racialised power relations. As this consciousness illuminates the violence involved in everyday interactions and language, it also makes it possible to envisage more effective means of resistance to such violence. The novels illustrate how gaining an intersectional consciousness of republican universalist discourse is critical to the ethnic minority female characters' ability to resist inegalitarian social structures. Ultimately, the thesis argues that, regardless of the protagonists' success or failure in challenging unequal power relations, the novels themselves expose and subvert the potentially discriminatory and oppressive mechanisms of republican universalist discourses in French society.

Connecting Republican Universalism, Intersectionality and the Novels of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê

In order to demonstrate how the arguments above constitute a significant and timely contribution to knowledge about Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê works, this section reviews previous research on the main issues examined within this thesis, namely discrimination, inequality and intersectional feminist consciousness. It considers these themes in relation to republican universalist discourses

[36] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2017), p.61.

around abstraction and integration to explore their relevance to the novels and their depictions of French society. This analysis sets out how intersectionality and republican universalism, in spite of arguments about their supposed incompatibility in France, share the same overarching goals. As a result, it delineates how an intersectional theoretical framework can be fruitfully applied to the texts to elucidate not only the failures of universalist ideals within the novels but how universalist discourses are implicated in the othering and oppression the ethnic minority female characters face. In turn, this reveals how such an intersectional framework can be applied more broadly within French and Francophone studies to offer insights into the role that republican universalism can play in perpetuating structural inequalities.

The Failure of Republican Universalist Ideals

Critical Approaches to Discrimination and Inequality in the works of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê

Although Lê and NDiaye depict multiple ethnic minority female characters facing discrimination and inequality in French society, these issues have rarely been scrutinised specifically in relation to these characters. Prejudice and abusive behaviour towards ethnic minority women in Lê's work has, to a great extent, been overlooked as most research on her novels is dedicated to the experience of exile from the homeland, mother-tongue and father and its impact on the characters' or authors' writing.[37] For instance, Lily Chiu argues that the morbid behaviour and missing hand of la Manchote from *Les trois parques* symbolise how she constructs her own identity based on postcolonial trauma; namely her separation from her family and Vietnam as a result of colonialism and communism.[38]

Whilst NDiaye's portrayal of discrimination and inequality has received more critical attention, analyses of these issues in both novelists' *œuvres* tend to consider the broader failure of the characters to maintain positive relationships with others. For example, the research of Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan has demonstrated how most of NDiaye's characters are affected in some way by the traumatic experience of blankness or the inhospitality that pervades

[37] See, for example, Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, 'The Exiled Woman's Burden: Father Figures in Lan Cao's and Linda Lê's Works', *The Journal of Twentieth Century Contemporary French Studies,* 6:2 (2002); Thi Thu Thuy Bui, 'Linda Lê : de l'exil du langage au langage de l'exil', in *Vietnam Littéraire… Traversées,* ed. by Julie Assier and Christiane Chaulet (Amiens: Encrage Université et CRTF-UCP, 2012); Sara Elizabeth Leek, ''L'écriture qui saigne' : Exile and Wounding in the Narratives of Nina Bouraoui and Linda Lê', *International Journal of Francophone Studies,* 15:2 (2012); Dawn Ng, 'Writing Exile Against the Grain: The Displaced 'Exiliterature' of Linda Lê', *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies,* 7:2 (2016).

[38] See Lily Chiu, ''An Open Wound on a Smooth Skin': (Post)colonialism and the Melancholic Performance of Trauma in the Works of Linda Lê', *Intersections: Gender & Sexuality in Asia & the Pacific,* 21 (2009).

the author's social universe.[39] Asibong's psychoanalytical analysis of NDiaye's *œuvre* reveals how widespread social exclusion or abandonment results in characters experiencing a state of blankness, typified by emotional deadness, zombification, memory blanks, and being haunted by non-things/memories. Applying Luce Irigaray's concept 'hospitality of difference', predicated on the self-affection of host and guest, Jordan exposes how inhospitality characterises most relationships in NDiaye's works and is self-perpetuating as characters treated as outsiders often become filled with self-loathing and are, consequently, unable to show hospitality to others. Similarly, as part of her examination of Lê's 'écriture du manque', Michèle Bacholle-Boŝković explores how love is lacking in the romantic relationships portrayed in Lê's earlier novels. Instead, the prevalence of toxic power relations means that the hopes placed in love 'laissent place à la déception… puis à la féroce volonté d'assujetir puis de détruire l'autre… l'alternative de base: manger ou être mangé'.[40] All three of these monographs explore one of the most significant relationships in the characters' lives that is often assumed to be positive: the relationship between mother and child. The regular failure of mothers to show their children nurturing love indicates the challenges of hospitality and the self-perpetuating nature of inhospitality as its failure has a negative impact children's future relationships.[41] These critical approaches highlight all characters' difficulties in having ethical relationships with others in Lê and NDiaye's works.

The authors also expose how their ethnic minority female characters' experiences of othering and violence can differ. In the case of Lê's work, Ching Selao's article on *Calomnies* and *Lame de fond* focuses specifically on how racist discrimination shapes the protagonists' experiences of exile.[42] Although previous research suggests otherwise, Selao demonstrates how exile is not necessarily liberating for the protagonists 'la nièce' and Van, respectively, because of the racism, paternalism and sense of perpetual otherness they face as immigrants in France.[43] Her chronological analysis brings to light the evolution in Lê's work from subtler evocations of how

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[39] See Andrew Asibong, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Shirley Jordan, *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions*, (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017).
[40] Michèle Bacholle-Boŝković, *Linda Lê, l'écriture du manque*, (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p.81.
[41] Asibong examines the failure of maternal figures to love and effectively care for their children in relation to André Green's concept of the 'dead mother complex' as one result and source of trauma within families. Jordan explores this failure in relation to the concept of inhospitality between guest and host and Bacholle-Boŝković examines the recurring figure of the authoritarian mother and her negative impact on her children. For an analysis of how this shapes the rejection of motherhood by many of Linda Lê's female characters, see Lê (2011); and Natalie Edwards, 'Deliberately Barren? The Rejection of Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Life Writing', *Australian Journal of French Studies,* 52:1 (2015).
[42] See Ching Selao, 'Oiseaux migrateurs : l'expérience exilique chez Kim Thúy et Linda Lê', *Voix et Images* 40:1 (2014).
[43] See Kate Averis, 'Negotiating Nomadic Identities: The Tensions of Exile in Contemporary Women's Writing in French and Spanish', (unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2011); Srilata Ravi, 'Towards a Progressive Sense of Spatial Issues: Linda Lê's *Calomnies*', in *Géopolitique et mondialisation : la relation Asie du sud-est/Europe,* ed. by Pierre Lagayette (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003).

immigrants deal with discrimination, loss and traumatism to more evident depictions of the racism they face, fuelled by nationalism and a fear of the barbaric 'outsider'. In relation to gender-based discrimination in Lê's earlier works, Nancy Huston investigates how male nihilist characters try to impose their beliefs on women, including the hatred of the maternal life-giving body integral to this philosophy. Huston explains that, for Lê's characters, it is 'impossible d'être nihiliste et femme sans exercer une violence contre son propre corps' because the traumatic attempt to reject the feminine leads to a sense of being split in two which is potentially accompanied by suicidal and schizoid tendencies.[44] In her thesis, Kate Averis focuses specifically on exiled women's negotiations of sexism in French society.[45] She argues that their experience of patriarchal systems in their homeland aids them in more successfully identifying and resisting the sexism that they then face in France. Such research offers valuable insights into the racism and sexism which ethnic minority female characters face in French society as depicted in Lê's novels. However, single-axis approaches, focusing either on sexism or racism but not their potential intersections, cannot offer a full picture of the various facets of this discrimination and the experiences of those who face both. In light of this, this thesis explores the dynamics and implications of othering and inequality when the racism identified by Selao and the sexism outlined by Huston and Averis come together to shape how ethnic majority (male) characters treat ethnic minority women in the novels.

Asibong argues that NDiaye's portrayals of blankness gain a 'supplementary' level for characters whose exclusion is linked to the way they are racialised.[46] He proposes the concept of 'blancness' to understand the erasure of this racialised difference achieved in fantasy by the characters and the numb condition which accompanies it. He notes that this distinct form of blankness does not last long because the characters are repeatedly confronted with the racializing discourses they wish to evade. Similarly, Jordan demonstrates how the gender-specific maternal inhospitality in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* is not only 'a product of the widespread structural inhospitality' in society but also intersects with specific forms of racism and classism: Nadia is unable to meet her son's desire for complete and loving openness because she wishes to escape 'the constraints of her social class and ethnic belonging'.[47] Jordan and Asibong offer a complex analysis of the power relations resulting in *blancness* and inhospitality as they explore how they are linked to various and interwoven forms of discrimination. Their identification of these intersectional power dynamics attests to the relevance of intersectionality to NDiaye's writing and indicates that an extended analysis focusing upon them and their impact could offer valuable

[44] Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir*, (Paris: Actes Sud, 2004), p.305.
[45] See Averis, (2011).
[46] Asibong (2013), p.22.
[47] Jordan (2017), p.122.

further insights. This thesis examines the intersecting gender and race-based power relations shaping the inhospitable discrimination, oppression and exclusion experienced by NDiaye's ethnic minority female characters and how their internalisation of the inferiorising discourses involved, and the *blancness* to which this leads, reinforces the oppression they face.

In her thesis exploring the theme of 'étrangeté' in contemporary French literature, Flavia Bujor employs an intersectional lens to demonstrate how a variety of NDiaye's characters are stigmatised as the bearers of a kind of 'étrangeté' because of their race, gender or class. She argues that such intersectional discrimination involves systems of domination particularly evident in the way that NDiaye's characters are subject to various forms of 'exploitation fondées sur la division sexuelle et raciale du travail'.[48] She suggests that the plasticity of NDiaye's protagonists, expressed through fantastic metamorphoses and monstrous figures, conveys an intrinsic 'étrangeté' that, in contrast to the stigma they face, exceeds essentialised categories such as race, gender and sexuality. However, she argues that this 'étrangeté' is the natural literary product of attempts to portray the body, rather than an example of how NDiaye's novels subvert reductive categorisations and discourses.[49] Indeed, Bujor states that literature should be neither understood as a form of resistance nor interpreted as something that can play a role in overcoming real-life issues because the impact cannot be measured.[50] This contradicts NDiaye's own belief, and also Lê's hope, that writing and education can transform attitudes and society.[51] As a result of this, this thesis explores how novels like *En famille* and *Mon cœur à l'étroit* actively stimulate an intersectional feminist consciousness through techniques such as imagery, mirroring, the fantastic and intertextuality to elucidate and undermine the relations of domination at work in French society.[52] In this vein, it builds upon Bujor's intersectional analysis by focusing on the experiences of the ethnic minority female characters specifically and problematising her broader arguments about the potential for resistance through literature.

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[48] Flavia Bujor, 'Une poétique de l'étrangeté : plasticité des corps et matérialité du pouvoir', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Rennes 2, 2018), p.33.
[49] Ibid. p.551.
[50] Ibid. p.559.
[51] Christine Rousseau, 'Marie NDiaye : « Je ne suis pas la porte-parole de quoi que ce soit »', *Le Monde,* (04/11/2009) <https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2009/11/04/marie-ndiaye-je-ne-suis-pas-le-porte-parole-de-quoi-que-ce-soit_1262847_3260.html> [accessed 04/09/2020]; Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, 'La 'lectrice' douce, écrivaine mortifière : rencontre avec Linda Lê', (2013) <https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Centres/Nicheallaigh%20-%20Le%20interview.pdf> [accessed 22/01/2021].
[52] I set out my argument about an intersectional feminist consciousness and how this builds on previous research in greater detail in the section 'Unveiling the Violence of Republican Universalist Discourses'.

Gloria Kwok offers the first in-depth examination of the intersectional sexism and racism that Lê's ethnic minority female characters face in France.[53] Employing Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, she demonstrates how Lê's characters are the victims of Orientalist stereotypes as they are racistly exotified and sexualised by French characters. She notes that Lê uses various techniques, such as not naming characters or countries and linking her stories to myths and dreams, to refuse an exotified portrayal of female migrants' experiences and thus undermine Orientalising stereotypes about women with Vietnamese origins. My research expands upon this by elucidating the oppressive social hierarchies with which this intersectional othering is imbricated as exotified and sexualised stereotypes are accompanied by restrictive expectations that ethnic minority female characters should be silent and socially and economically immobile in France. Additionally, it explores how Lê depicts the difficulty of unmasking and resisting such power relations.

Examining previous research into NDiaye and Lê's depictions of discrimination and inequality and its lacunae illustrates both the pertinence of intersectional approaches to their works and the need for further scrutiny to demarginalise the experiences of their ethnic minority female characters. This is particularly important for Lê's works where the othering and oppression that such characters face is overlooked through approaches focusing exclusively upon the challenges of exile in relation to the loss of the father, homeland and Vietnamese language. This thesis elaborates upon and sometimes problematises current findings about the experience of exile by demonstrating how it is shaped by the intersectional hierarchies which the characters encounter in France. As my analysis of NDiaye's novels considers the experiences of ethnic minority women born in France, the comparison between her protagonists and Lê's exiled characters offers a broader picture of how different ethnic minority women's experiences and overarching structures of domination are portrayed in literature.

A central element of intersectional approaches and this thesis is contextualisation. This is the case for literary analysis as much as feminist scholarship or activism as literature is also shaped by the socio-political context in which authors write. Examining the dialogue between literature and its context can thus elucidate both without assuming either can be fully grasped. The next section explores the links between discrimination and inequality as portrayed in the novels and the discourses of republican universalism which shape French society, especially abstraction and integration. It considers the controversies around intersectionality within these universalist discourses and outlines how my own intersectional approach is not incompatible with

[53] Gloria Kwok, 'Reversing the French Gaze: Four Vietnamese Francophone Women from 1910s to 2000s – Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh, Ly Thu Ho, and Linda Lê', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Illinois, 2016).

or a threat to the universalist ideals of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, as is often suggested in France. This reveals how my contextual as well as theoretical framework can shed further light on the ethnic minority female characters' experiences and the broader power relations depicted in Lê and NDiaye's works.

Abstraction and Integration: Safeguarding Universalist Ideals?

Based upon the notion of universal rights for all, republican universalism designates 'alternatively or simultaneously a political doctrine, a political culture or a conception of nationhood and citizenship'.[54] Enshrined in the 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, it is often framed as a positive legacy of the Revolution and Enlightenment philosophy and has been conceived as integral to the enactment of the principles of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* first expressed during the Revolution. As a result, republican universalism has played a pivotal role in framing and shaping attitudes, research, policies, and behaviour relating to the issues of discrimination and inequality. In recent decades, emphasis has been placed upon how, through universalist discourses and practices, the Republic sets out to uphold principles including freedom of expression, equality for all, and respect for human dignity regardless of sex, ethnicity or religion, for example.[55]

Republican universalism therefore forms part of the contextual backdrop to Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's novels, published from the mid-1980s, and informs their explorations of the discrimination and inequality faced by their ethnic minority female characters. Notably, this thesis demonstrates how these characters' rights to equality, fraternity, and freedom, including of expression and even thought, are systematically denied through racialised and gendered systems of oppression. In order to understand these failures of universalist ideals in French society, it is worth considering them in relation to concepts deemed central to their enactment: abstraction and integration. Over the last few decades each has been included in highly contentious debates not reducible to a Left/Right divide that have both direct and indirect implications for migrant and ethnic minority women in France. To demonstrate the relevance of this contextualisation to the arguments of this thesis and its contribution to feminist, postcolonial and literary research, I briefly outline abstraction and integration and explore their pertinence to the novels' themes of othering and oppression. This takes into consideration the authors' opinions, as expressed in

[54] Eléonore Lépinard and Amy G. Mazur, 'Republican Universalism Faces the Feminist Challenge: The Continuing Struggle for Gender Equality', in *The French Fifth Republic at Fifty,* ed. by Sylvain Brouard, Andrew M. Appleton, and Amy G. Mazur (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p.248.
[55] Castex (09/12/2020).

paratexts and interviews, and previous research into abstraction and integration in NDiaye and Lê's writing.

Republican universalism proposes a citizenship model based less on a shared culture and identity than on a voluntary commitment to universalist values and the French state as their principle upholder. The theoretical abstraction of the individual French citizen is meant to ensure that any group affiliations, such as those of gender, culture or religion, become neither a barrier to gaining French citizenship and the universalist rights it grants nor an impediment to free participation in political life. It has therefore been conceived as key to guaranteeing freedom, equality and fraternity in an inclusive French society where citizenship is based on residency as well as family connections through *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* policies.[56] As a result of this, the use of terms such as 'gender, 'race' or 'ethnicity' to categorise the population, often depicted as a negative trait of Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism, is seen as contrary to republican universalist ideals.[57] Indeed, official sources argue that their employment in political movements or academic research, even to analyse and tackle discrimination, 'contribue à faire exister socialement des catégories de population' and that the use of ethnic categories encourages 'le sentiment communautaire au sein d'une société'.[58] 'Communautarisme', a spectre that recurrently appears as a threat to universalist abstraction and integration in France, conveys 'a problematic fracturing of the nation along the lines of particularist affiliation'.[59] This statement reveals that the failure to respect abstraction in both word and deed is presented as a cause of social fragmentation contrary to republican universalism. Further, through the association of social categories, or even the terms to describe them, with a multiculturalism opposed to republicanism, such division is portrayed as an exception in French society that arises from foreign Anglo-Saxon imports.

Like abstraction, integration is often depicted as a lynchpin of the republican universalist ideals inherited from the Enlightenment. It became institutionalised through a report by the *Commission de la Nationalité* (CN) in 1988, set up by President Jacques Chirac to investigate public

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[56] Marceau Long, *Être français aujourd'hui et demain*, (La Commission de la nationalité, 1988) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/124000530.pdf> [accessed 15/12/2020] p.651. See Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism and Citizenship in Modern France*, (London: Routledge, 1992). And Louis Dumont, *German Ideology: From France to Germany and Back*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994). Referenced in Jeremy Jennings, 'Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France', *Cambridge University Press,* 30 (2000).

[57] See Alec Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*, (London: Routledge, 2007), p.10.

[58] République française, 'Faut-il élaborer des statistiques ethniques ?', *Vie Publique,* (25/06/2019) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/19354-faut-il-elaborer-des-statistiques-ethniques> [accessed 13/01/2021].

[59] Jennifer Fredette, 'Difference-Conscious Critical Media Engagement and the Communitarian Question', in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France,* ed. by Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp.23-24.

attitudes towards the French nationality code, and by the subsequent creation of the *Haut Conseil à l'intégration* (HCI) in 1989. The CN identifies integration as a legacy of French assimilation policy which aimed to avoid social fragmentation by inculcating French values, along with a shared language and history, in naturalised citizens and the children of foreigners. However, the commission proposes 'integration', rather than assimilation, as a better term to describe this process because the goal was supposedly to allow these new citizens to participate actively in national life without erasing cultural or religious differences.[60] Similarly, the HCI suggests that modern-day integration focuses on demarginalising all those 'laissés-pour-compte' by creating solidarity between 'les différentes composantes ethniques et culturelles' of French society.[61] Some of the main policy principles designed to achieve this over the last few decades include that integration promotes both universalist rights and the reciprocal duties which safeguard them; integrates abstract individuals rather than groups or communities; and leads to no positive discrimination in favour of minorities.[62] In this vein, integration is conceived as a means to protect republican universalism through an emphasis on individuals both benefiting from and upholding the principles of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* and, consequently, cultivating social unity whilst protecting cultural, religious and other differences.

Although the CN and HCI offer a broad definition of the marginalised who will benefit from integration in France, the HCI annual reports pinpoint the different demographic of immigrants coming from postcolonial rather than European countries as a particular challenge for integration.[63] There is a concern throughout the reports about dealing with differences in cultural values so all may feel a sense of belonging in the nation, including many in the late 80s and 90s who fear that French culture is 'menacée par une quantité excessive d'altérité'.[64] They therefore

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[60] Long (1988), p.24.

[61] Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI), 'Pour un modèle français d'intégration', (1991) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/124000544.pdf> [accessed 21/01/2020] (p.18).

[62] These four principles are identified as relevant in the 90s and 2000s in Jennings (2000), pp.583-84; Ariane Chebel d'Appolonia, 'Race, Racism and Anti-Discrimination', in *The French Fifth Republic at Fifty,* ed. by Sylvain Brouard, Andrew M. Appleton, and Amy G. Mazur (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p.269.

[63] This can be seen in the focus on isssues such as immigrant housing and Islam in annual reports: Haut conseil à l'intégration (HCI), 'L'Islam dans la République', (2000) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/014000017.pdf> [accessed 21/01/2020]; Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI), 'Etudes et intégration : avis sur le logement des personnes immigrées. Rapport statistique annuel. Présentation de l'Institut d'études', (2008) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/084000269.pdf> [accessed 21/01/2020]. Jennings (2000), p.579. Referencing Long (1988), p.28.

[64] Long (1988), p.86. This constitutes a change of emphasis from the 'insertion' discourses and policies for ethnic minorities adopted in the early years of the Mitterand presidency (1981-1995) linked to the idea of 'le droit à la différence': it was based on the more multiculturalist idea, in nature if not in name, that ethnic minorities could be '"inserted" into the social fabric of France while still retaining a distinctive cultural identity'. The appropriation of the term 'le droit à la différence' by the far right, linked to an essentialised and ethnocentric understanding of French national identity and the idea that minority cultural differences

propose that the successful diminution of socio-economic marginalisation through integration requires a strong national identity based upon shared universalist principles and abstraction. They argue that this would, firstly, make the rights and obligations accompanying citizenship, and consequently active participation in French society, more appealing to foreigners.[65] Secondly, they suggest it would help assuage French fears about the erosion of national or cultural identity; fears that were growing in line with the increasing popularity of far right politics.[66] Integration and a national identity tied to universalist ideals are thus depicted as two correlated elements of an overall demarginalising process that ensures that everyone feels a sense of belonging within the nation and benefits from the promises of republican universalism.

This summary highlights how the goals of abstraction and integration in French society are broadly aligned and that these processes are interdependent as neither can be achieved without the other. Likewise, this thesis demonstrates how abstraction and integration, although studied in different chapters, are intertwined in Lê and NDiaye's works in the same way as the issues of othering and oppression.[67] Before looking to the novels, however, it is worth reflecting on the authors' own attitudes towards these concepts. This is evidenced in their conception of themselves as writers and, in particular, their rejection of the kinds of sex or race-based categorisations often portrayed as a threat to republican universalism. NDiaye has stated on multiple occasions that her writing is not shaped by her gender, origins, skin colour, or age but that 'J'écris en tant qu'être humain'.[68] In a similar vein, Lê refuses labels such as francophone, Vietnamese or woman author: 'je n'aime pas les étiquettes. Je préfère qu'on me considère

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were a threat, influenced the change in emphasis from 'insertion' to 'integration' policies in the 1980s. Hargreaves (2007), p.183. See also Valérie Amiraux and Patrick Simon, 'There are no Minorities Here: Cultures of Scholarship and Public Debate on Immigrants and Integration in France', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology,* 47(3-4) (2006), p.200; Adrian Favell, *Philosophies of Integration: Immigration and the Idea of Citizenship in France and Britain*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), p.54.

[65] This is reinforced through the *Contrat d'accueil et d'intégration* (CAI) introduced in 2002 and the *Contrat d'intégration républicaine* (CIR) which replaces it in 2016. These pacts are intended to encourage the integration of foreigners living in France by educating them about republican universalist rights and values, with particular emphasis on secularism and equality between men and women, and potentially French language and culture. Haut conseil à l'intégration (HCI), 'Charte de la laïcité dans les services publics et autres avis', (2007) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/074000341.pdf > [accessed 08/04/2020] pp.179, 84).

[66] Amiraux and Simon (2006), p.200.

[67] As a result of this, the literary analysis chapters consider the interdependence of abstraction and integration as well as discrimination and inequality.

[68] Tirthankar Chanda, 'Marie NDiaye : « Je cherche la musique des phrases »', (2013) <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20130212-Ladivine-marie-diaye-cherche-musique-phrases-faulkner-proust> [accessed 26/08/2020]; Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan, 'Rencontre avec Marie NDiaye', in *Marie NDiaye : l'étrangeté à l'œuvre,* ed. by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaire de Septentrion, 2009).

comme un écrivain. Point final'.[69] Such statements underline their belief that categories can create restrictive borders. For NDiaye, to define oneself using such categories is not only to 'se réduire, se résumer à des critères' but also to reductively stipulate who others are at the same time.[70] Meanwhile, Lê's reaction to the term 'francophone' encapsulates how labels run contrary to her interpretation of her role as a writer: 'on n'écrit pas pour être un poète allemand, russe, français, francophone, mais pour être TOUT et abolir les frontières'.[71] Writing, for Lê, is a means to challenge the social structures linked to categories that sow division and limit one's horizons, whether national, gendered or other. Lydie Moudileno's statement about NDiaye in relation to her repudiation of gender and race-based categories is applicable to both authors as it has 'œuvré à l'image d'un auteur irréversiblement inscrit dans l'universel'.[72] NDiaye and Lê's rejections of identity-related labels thus respect the republican concept of abstraction that is meant to ensure that people are not reduced to their gender or ethnicity, for example.

NDiaye and Lê's novels exemplify how the desire to overcome socially constructed frontiers through writing involves illuminating rather than ignoring such barriers. By portraying the divisive and widespread discrimination and inequality experienced by their ethnic minority female characters, this thesis argues that the novelists reveal how abstraction and integration, when understood as egalitarian and demarginalising universalist measures, are not enacted in the Republic. This builds on previous analyses of integration in Lê's works and abstraction in NDiaye's which focus predominantly on racism. In her thesis, Chloé Brendlé demonstrates how the social production of a French national community or identity, namely what is seen as the norm within French society, is depicted within NDiaye's novels as being dependent upon the construction of the marginal: characters create an ethnocentric vision of French identity through the symbolic exclusion of ethnic minorities. As a result of this, Brendlé notes the contrast between the ideal of the abstract citizen and reality: 'Censé être libéré des appartenances pré-politiques, il est en effet sans cesse réassigné à celles-ci, qu'il s'agisse d'origine sociale ou nationale, de choix religieux, culturels ou autres, qu'on l'interroge sur la provenance de son nom ou sur ses croyances'.[73] The racism experienced by ethnic minority characters conveys the failure of French society in the

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[69] Loucif (2007), p.891; Ook Chung, 'Linda Lê, « tueuse en dentelles »', *Liberté,* 36:2 (1994); Ni Cheallaigh (2013).
[70] Gilles Anquetil and François Armanet, 'Marie NDiaye: « Se définir, c'est se réduire »', *Le Nouvel Observateur,* (2009) <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20091103.BIB4345/marie-ndiaye-se-definir-c-039-est-se-reduire.html > [accessed 02/09/2020].
[71] Ni Cheallaigh (2013).
[72] Lydie Moudileno, 'Marie NDiaye : entre visibilité et reserve', in *Une femme puissante,* ed. by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p.166.
[73] Chloé Brendlé, 'Seuls, ensemble : fabrique des appartenances et imaginaires de la communauté dans des récits contemporains français', (unpublished doctoral thesis, l'Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, 2017), pp.44-45.

novels to correctly implement the universalist principle of abstraction. Similarly, in their examination of guilt and betrayal in Linda Lê's works, Kathryn Lay-Chenchabi and Tess Do expose how the ethnic minority characters are perpetually marginalised in France.[74] This leads to the characters' sense that they have been betrayed by the French nation because, regardless of their behaviour, they are seen and treated as outsiders. This thesis establishes how, through her portrayal of racialisation, Lê reveals abstraction is lacking because of the existence of exclusionary mechanisms similar to those identified by Brendlé in NDiaye's writing.

In addition, this thesis explores sexism as another example of the failure of abstraction, along with the impact it has on ethnic minority female characters when it intersects with the racism they also experience. This makes it possible to shed greater light on the experiences of the protagonists and the complex power relations that shape their experiences. This is particularly valuable as NDiaye and Lê's portrayals are consistent with the findings of research into discrimination at the time in which they are writing and also offer insight into its intersectional nature, often overlooked in such research. This is exemplified in the European Commission's 1998 comparative study of racism throughout Europe and the *Enquête Nationale sur les violences envers les femmes en France* (ENVEFF), published in 2000. The former reveals that 18% of French people admitted to being 'plutôt racistes'; 40% were 'tentés par des idées racistes'; and concludes that 'la distance et l'hostilité envers les non-Européens sont particulièrement fortes en France, en particulier à l'égard des Arabes, des Africains et des Asiatiques'.[75] The ENVEFF, the first large scale systematic investigation of violence against women, uncovered the wide-spread rather than exceptional nature of violence against women across all social spheres in France and that it was most often perpetrated in private homes rather than in public.[76] Both studies played an important role in exposing the pervasive nature of sex and race-based discrimination against women and ethnic minorities, especially those with postcolonial origins, in French society.[77] My literary analysis identifies how, years before such sociological research was conducted, Lê and NDiaye's

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[74] Kathryn Lay-Chenchabi and Tess Do, 'Guilt and Betrayal in the Works of Azouz Begag and Linda Lê', *French Cultural Studies,* 19:1 (2008).

[75] Sophie Body-Gendrot, 'L'universalisme français à l'épreuve des discriminations', *Hommes et Migrations,* 1245 (2003) <https://www.persee.fr/doc/homig_1142-852x_2003_num_1245_1_4060> (p.19); referencing Commission nationale des droits de l'homme (CNCDH), *La lutte contre le racisme et la xénophobie*, (Paris: La Documentation française, 1998).

[76] See Maryse Jaspard, 'Proposition de loi renforçant la prévention et la répression des violences au sein du couple : Lutte contre les violences au sein du couple', (2000) <http://www.reseau-terra.eu/IMG/pdf/JASPARD.pdf> [accessed 11/01/2021]; Maryse Jaspard, 'L'Enquête nationale sur les violences envers les femmes en France (Enveff) : historique et contextes', *Reseau Terra,* (2000) <http://www.reseau-terra.eu/IMG/pdf/JASPARD.pdf> [accessed 11/01/2021].

[77] See Body-Gendrot (2003); Gill Allwood, 'Gender-based Violence Against Women in Contemporary France: Domestic Violence and Forced Marriage Policy since the Istanbul Convention', *Modern & Contemporary France,* 24:4 (2016).

novels illustrate the structural nature of racism and sexism and how they silence and immobilise ethnic minority female characters.

Laura Bea Jensen also considers how NDiaye's works challenge the supposed 'race-blindness' of republican universalism in French society and politics by portraying how some bodies are racialised and therefore made particular. She interprets the *femme-poisson*'s experiences in *La naufragée* allegorically and suggests that NDiaye's choice of a creature that is half-human and half-fish reflects the marginalisation experienced by French people who are mixed-race because of the 'invisible and impermeable barriers between people of color and full, unqualified belonging in the Republic'.[78] Further, she argues that the setting of the novel in the 18th century means that it simultaneously evokes the experience of being mixed-race in contemporary France and the nation's history of colonialism, racism and chattel slavery. Yet the bi-partite nature of the *femme-poisson* also mirrors how both racism and sexism intersect to shape her life in France and thus invites an intersectional analysis of NDiaye's works. This thesis expands upon Jensen's work to expose how NDiaye employs imagery and other tools to link modern-day experiences of intersectional discrimination to historical failures of republican universalist ideals. For example, it demonstrates that imagery related to slavery and sexual exploitation in *En famille* conveys how the experiences of ethnic minority women in France are shaped by modern manifestations of the intersecting racism and sexism enacted on African women's body during the slave trade.

Similarly, my analysis of Lê's works builds upon previous research to uncover the continuity of intersectional power relations between colonial and postcolonial times. Jane Bradley Winston and Tess Do both explore how Lê's *Les trois parques* employs intertextuality and metaphors, respectively, to convey how the violence of colonialism has reverberations in the discourses and practices of modern French society.[79] Meanwhile, Leslie Barnes has examined how Lê depicts the postcolonial literary market as imposing a racially stereotyped identity upon ethnic minorities and their writing and thereby reproducing the relationship between the coloniser and colonised.[80] In a similar vein, this thesis argues that Lê's novels *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot*, both published in the early 1990s, employ imagery, mirroring and intertextuality to expose how ethnic minority women are subjected to a racist and sexist modern-day *mission civilisatrice* on French soil.[81] This concept is interwoven with republican universalism as it was as a result of its universalist

[78] Jensen, (2017) p.133.
[79] Jane Bradley Winston, 'Playing Hardball: Linda Lê's *Les trois parques*', in *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations* ed. by Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee (Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005); Tess Do, 'Entre salut et damnation : métaphores chez Linda Lê', *French Cultural Studies,* 15:2 (2015).
[80] Leslie Barnes, 'Linda Lê's *Voix* and the Crisis of Representation: Alterity and the Vietnamese Immigrant Writer in France', *French Forum,* 32:3 (2007).
[81] Lê (1993); Linda Lê, *Les dits d'un idiot*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1995).

principles regarding human rights that the French Republic conceived itself as 'uniquely suited and morally obligated to expand its empire and 'civilize' its subjects' in the past.[82] Lê depicts how ethnic majority (male) characters set out to 'educate' the female protagonists or even to 'save' them from their supposedly inferior and oppressive cultures and men. Her works therefore anticipate Pascal Blanchard's argument that the treatment of ethnic minorities in the *banlieues* as 'uncivilised' and solely responsible for their failed integration into French society reveals how integration can function as a contemporary *mission civilisatrice*.[83] Further, Lê portrays how this inegalitarian mission is founded upon a racist and sexist inferiorisation of ethnic minority women incompatible with abstraction.

Such contradictions between the promise of difference-blindness through abstraction and the reality of racism and sexism can be traced back, as the authors' references to colonialism suggest, to the inception of republican universalism. In spite of the universalist claims of the 1789 *Déclaration des de l'homme* whereby 'Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits' and discriminatory social distinctions are forbidden, various groups were denied equal rights.[84] Firstly, the universal subject was immediately incorporated into the particular framework of French citizenship, denying non-citizens access to a supposedly universal set of rights. Secondly, equality was denied to various groups of French nationals; namely, women, the working classes, Jews and colonial subjects. In this way, NDiaye and Lê's explorations of intersectional marginalisation and inequality illustrate not only how republican universalist ideals are not upheld in the present but that this is a legacy of the nation's past failures, particularly in its imperialist ventures. Through this idea of continuity and a portrayal of the widespread nature of racism and sexism, the novels therefore challenge discourses that define such problems as exceptional or external to French society.

Lê and NDiaye's depictions of ethnic minority women also undermine some of the main discourses about universalist integration. As noted above, this thesis exposes how integration appears as a *mission civilisatrice* in Lê's depictions of modern French society that is neither demarginalising nor egalitarian, as the CN and HCI propose. Additionally, research into both authors' novels reveals that cultural differences are often not respected in the integration process. In her analysis of how Lê's exiled Vietnamese characters re-define themselves on French soil, Sarah Cuvelier maintains that one of the main challenges that they face is that their 'terre

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[82] Jensen, (2017) p.14.
[83] See Pascal Blanchard, 'Les non-dits de l'antiracisme français : la « République coloniale »', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée,* 61:1 (2000), p.5.
[84] République française, 'Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen de 1789', *Constitution du 4 octobre 1958,* (1789) <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/contenu/menu/droit-national-en-vigueur/constitution/declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen-de-1789> [accessed 15/01/2021].

d'accueil […] encourage plus que de raison l'amnésie culturelle dans une perspective assimilatrice'.[85] In other words, acceptance in or integration into French society is presented to the exiled characters as dependent upon the erasure of their origins rather than the respect of them by others. Likewise, Selao notes how novels such as *Calomnies* portray the integration process required to gain citizenship as involving conformity to French social norms and resulting, for the exile, in 'une mise à mort de son identité'.[86] Lê's works thus challenge the idea that integration is based solely upon the internalisation of universalist principles and reflect Valérie Amiraux's argument that it is commonly interpreted in France as an assimilatory 'process of reduction, through acculturation, of the cultural distance of an individual from the French society'.[87]

The assimilatory tendencies of republican integration are also explored in NDiaye's novels. Camelia Manolescu proposes that *Un temps de saison*, in which Herman is compelled to assimilate the village's customs in order to find his missing wife and child, constitutes 'une métaphore sur l'intégration, sur le choc des cultures étrangères'.[88] She notes that this process negates its own goal, as Herman forgets his wife and child, and leads to the dissolution of his identity as symbolised through his physical disintegration. In a similar vein, Bujor suggests that NDiaye's literary depictions of food represent the assimilation, internalisation and rejection of norms and people.[89] Whilst the regional recipes known and cooked by Fanny in *En famille* symbolise her attempts to conform to French social and cultural norms, those served to Nadia in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* convey how she is encouraged to assimilate French norms.[90] These studies reveal how NDiaye's novels, like Lê's, contradict the discourses of official bodies like the HCI that republican integration respects cultural differences by portraying how it is often inseparable from assimilation.

As well as highlighting this gap between universalist discourses and the reality of integration practices, this thesis builds upon previous research in several ways. Firstly, it explores how the ethnic minority female characters' experience of integration in both authors' works is shaped by the sexism as well as racism they face. This elucidates how the expectations of conformity placed

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[85] Sarah Cuvelier, 'Linda Lê et le Viêt-Nam : péril, voix, anamorphose', *Indomemoires,* (31/10/2012) <https://indomemoires.hypotheses.org/2279> [accessed 17/02/2021].
[86] Ching Selao, 'De l'exil à la parole exilée : l'impossible libération dans l'œuvre de Linda Lê', in *La francophonie: esthétique et dynamique de libération,* ed. by Ibrahim H. Badr (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p.140.
[87] Valérie Amiraux, 'Crisis and New Challenges? French Republicanism Featuring Multiculturalism', in *European Multiculturalism Revisited,* ed. by Alessandro Silj (London: Zed Books, 2010), p.76.
[88] Camelia Manolescu, 'L'Espace clos ou le thème du village dans le roman « Un temps de saison » de Marie NDiaye', *Literature: European Landmarks of Identity* 7(2010), p.197.
[89] Bujor, (2018) p.230.
[90] Ibid. p.218.

upon them are linked to restrictive gendered as well as racialised stereotypes and that these shape the protagonists' daily lives beyond specific processes such as gaining citizenship. Secondly, it illuminates the complexity of the novelists' depictions of integration as this process is interpreted differently by various ethnic majority French characters. Whilst some encourage ethnic minority women to erase their cultural differences, others wish them to retain or even promote them, for example, through their writing or sex work. My analysis establishes how this attitude involves an exploitative commodification of exotic differences, and consequently the women associated with them, that benefits the ethnic majority (men). As a result, even though integration and assimilation are not aligned in such examples, the integration process is linked to the intersectional inferiorisation of ethnic minority women because of their ethnicity and gender.

This thesis also indicates how Lê and NDiaye's ethnic minority female protagonists continue to be seen as outsiders in France, regardless of whether they conform to the intersectional conditions for integration placed upon them. This reveals that intersectional discrimination, rather than cultural difference, is portrayed as the main barrier they face to being accepted and fully participating in French society as equals. The focus upon cultural differences and economic factors in republican universalist discourses meant that it was not until the late 1990s that researching and combating racism were prioritised in integration-related policymaking.[91] The HCI made discrimination the main theme of its 1998 report and examined how it functioned as a barrier to integration for immigrants and ethnic minorities. This paved the way for more targeted anti-discrimination policies than the banning of racial discrimination in the 1958 Constitution and the law of 1972 which had been mostly ineffectual.[92] NDiaye and Lê therefore explore an issue that would not be raised seriously at a national level for between several years after their literary works were published.

The negative impact of overlooking discrimination because of a narrow focus upon cultural difference can be seen not only in policymaking but also in research on NDiaye and Lê's works. The large body of research upon exile in Lê's work to date has often focused upon the loss of the homeland and has sometimes neglected how discrimination shapes this experience. Similarly, some research has argued that Fanny's exclusion in *En famille* is related to the challenges posed by the increasingly multicultural nature of French society.[93] As Fanny is brought up solely by her ethnic majority French mother rather than in a multicultural household, this kind of argument is erroneous and disguises the role played by intersectional discrimination in her marginalisation.

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[91] Hargreaves (2007), p.188.
[92] Ibid. p.185.
[93] See K. Ambroise Teko-Agbo, '*En famille* or the Problematic of Alterity', *Research in African Literatures,* 26:2 (1995).

Such oversights evidence the need for contextualised approaches to Lê and NDiaye's works which critique the (universalist) discourses with which their writing is in dialogue. An important element of creating such frameworks involves examining them in relation to the context to which they will be applied. This is particularly vital when applying intersectionality to consider universalist discourses because the former has often been vilified as anathema to republican universalism. The next section outlines and problematises these debates to demonstrate that, as its main goals are aligned with those of republican universalism, intersectionality can be effectively employed to analyse republican universalism and the failure of its ideals within and beyond the novels.

Intersectionality and Republican Universalism: Incompatible or Reconcilable?

Intersectionality is a polemic topic in French academia and society. It is associated with Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism and identity politics and consequently deemed contrary to republican universalist ideals. In particular, issue is taken with its use of categories such as a 'gender' or 'ethnicity' as tools of analysis. Although they have become more commonly adopted in French academic research and the media since the early 2000s, the gulf between those supporting and opposing these terms and the theories which employ them, particularly postcolonialism and intersectionality, has widened.[94] The historian Gérard Noiriel recently reiterated common assumptions that their application in intersectional analyses essentialises differences and constitutes a differentialist 'rupture avec la tradition républicaine'.[95] He also argues that intersectionality cannot elucidate 'la complexité des réalités sociales' because it does not privilege a class-centred analysis.[96] The influence and prevalence of such beliefs is evidenced in the way that an online dossier contesting Noiriel's interpretation of intersectionality was temporarily censored because of large numbers of adverse reactions sent to the publisher.[97]

The more recent 'Manifeste des 100', signed by academics, decries decolonial and intersectional approaches in academia and political movements such as *Les Indigènes de la République* as responsible for fomenting communitarianism and 'une haine des "blancs" et de la France'.[98] In a subsequent article, they claim that those who defend such approaches in relation

[94] See Allwood (2016), p.381; Chloé Leprince, 'Race, islamophobie, intersectionnalité : ces mots qui restent tabous en France', *FranceCulture,* (2019) <https://www.franceculture.fr/sociologie/race-islamophobie-intersectionnalite-ces-mots-qui-restent-tabous-en-france> [accessed 14/06/2019].
[95] Gérard Noiriel, 'Réflexions sur « la gauche identitaire »', (28/10/2019) <https://noiriel.wordpress.com/2018/10/29/reflexions-sur-la-gauche-identitaire/> [accessed 15/07/2021].
[96] Ibid.
[97] See Leprince (2019).
[98] See Le manifeste des 100, 'Une centaine d'universitaires alertent : « Sur l'islamisme, ce qui nous menace, c'est la persistance du déni »', *Le Monde,* (31/10/2020) <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/10/31/une-centaine-d-universitaires-alertent-sur-l-islamisme-ce-qui-nous-menace-c-est-la-persistance-du-deni_6057989_3232.html> [accessed 18/12/2020]. The

to republican universalist values do so 'à rebours de leurs definitions'.[99] Similarly, President Emmanuel Macron and Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer have stated that academia 'has encouraged the ethnicization of social issues' that leads to separatism and that intersectionality, by essentialising communities and identities, is 'at the antipodes of the Republican model' and universalist equality, respectively.[100] The Higher Education Minister Frédérique Vidal consequently proposed censoring academic work to ensure that '*Les libertés académiques s'exercent dans le respect des valeurs de la République*'.[101] Whilst this proposal was rejected, it highlights that many believe symbolic abstraction remains at the heart of republican universalist discourses and that this should be reflected in or imposed on academia, the media and society as a whole as well as in law.

The debates and controversies above convey how intersectional and postcolonial research and movements, along with their analytical tools, are often deemed one of the main perils for the Republic's universalist values and identity. However, this assumption is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it often misrepresents how intersectionality is employed. On the one hand, intersectionality adopts a non-essentialist understanding of social categories to explore how they are socially constructed but have a material impact on people's lives. Concepts such as 'gender', 'ethnicity' and 'minorities' are not treated, as Pap Ndiaye notes, as pre-existing objects with meaning in and of themselves but as tools to analyse processes 'historiquement et politiquement construites et sous-tendues par des relations de pouvoir qui ont changés dans le temps'.[102] In this way, intersectionality does not produce such categories and is interested less in

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manifesto argues that decoloniality and intersectionality fomented the Islamic fundamentalism which motivated the murder of teacher Samuel Paty and the Nice attack in 2020. The explicit denunciation of *Les Indigènes de la République* is in keeping with a widespread rejection of the movement since its inception in 2005 that involves claims that it is, among others, separatist, racist, anti-Semitic, anti-feminist and homophobic, see Leprince (2019).

[99] Le manifeste des 100 (31/10/2020).

[100] Paola Pietrandrea, 'Academic Freedom in the Context of France's New Approach to 'Separatism'', *Open Democracy,* (2 November 2020) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/academic-freedom-in-the-context-of-frances-new-approach-to-separatism/?utm_source=fb&fbclid=IwAR1BlgCH_2wGDTCNa6fcHrHok2GD-rfYGyqBNDO8_maK9f9M7x5YCPdfvjo> [accessed 18/12/2020]. Quoting from Françoise Fressoz and Cédric Pietralunga, 'Après le déconfinement, l'Elysée craint un vent de révolte : « Il ne faut pas perdre la jeunesse »', *Le Monde,* (10/06/2020) <https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/06/10/il-ne-faut-pas-perdre-la-jeunesse-l-elysee-craint-un-vent-de-revolte_6042430_823448.html> [accessed 15/07/2021]. Pietrandrea (2 November 2020). Quoting from Marianne Enault, 'Hommage à Samuel Paty, lutte contre l'islamisme : Blanquer précise au JDD ses mesures pour la rentrée scolaire', *Le Journal du dimanche,* (24/10/2020) <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/hommage-a-samuel-paty-lutte-contre-lislamisme-blanquer-precise-au-jdd-ses-mesures-pour-la-rentree-scolaire-4000971> [accessed 18/12/2020].

[101] Olivier Bénis, 'La future loi « programmation de la recherche » va-t-elle rendre illégales les occupations d'universités ?', *France Inter,* (12/11/2020) <https://www.franceinter.fr/societe/la-future-loi-programmation-de-la-recherche-va-t-elle-rendre-illegales-les-occupations-d-universites > [accessed 18/11/2020].

[102] Pap Ndiaye, *La condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p.39.

their existence per se than in 'the particular values attached to them, and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies'.[103] On the other hand, intersectional theorists have contested the argument that power relations can only be fully illuminated through class-centred approaches. Intersectionality rejects a hierarchal conceptualisation of these categories and the power relations involved in favour of a 'lens of mutual construction', which explores how 'people's lives and identities are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways'.[104] This promotes a relational focus on interconnections across social divisions in order to offer a more complex analysis of how relations of domination and, as a result, people's experiences, are affected by multiple and imbricated factors in society.[105] The arguments made against intersectionality above therefore misrepresent how this critical methodology is employed or do not consider how it can contribute greater knowledge about power relations in a way that seeks to undermine the divisions they foster.

Secondly, the assumption that intersectionality and republican universalism are irreconcilable can lead to the real issues of discrimination and inequality being disregarded. The focus on methodology means that those who speak out about marginalisation or injustice in French society with reference to intersectionality or postcolonialism are often portrayed as threatening, rather than trying to uphold or create, a society that enacts universalist ideals. As such, the insights they have to offer, whether based on personal experience or academic research, may be ignored by contesting the method of critical inquiry. As intersectionality and postcolonialism are often applied by those who are minoritised, such arguments risk further silencing and marginalising those most negatively affected by intersectional power relations.

Thirdly, the fixation on methodology overlooks the fact that intersectionality and republican universalism share the same goals. One of the main principles shaping intersectionality is that all forms of domination are interlinked. For this reason, bell hooks states that the overarching objective of intersectional feminism is not just to end violence against women but to end all forms of violence, social domination and exploitation, whether perpetrated by men or women.[106] Tied into this is the ambition to demarginalise those who are minoritised and prevented from participating fully and equally in social and political life. The aims of intersectionality are therefore in line with the desire through republican universalism to create a society embodying the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity for all.

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[103] Crenshaw (1991), p.1297.
[104] Collins and Bilge (2016), p.26.
[105] Ibid. p.28.
[106] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p.118.

An awareness of the shared goal of republican universalism and intersectionality to create an egalitarian society places the polemic around invalid or 'threatening' methodologies into perspective. Various French theorists who believe in republican universalism and its ideals, such as Christine Delphy and Mame-Fatou Niang, have demonstrated the need to employ social categories such as 'ethnicity' and 'gender': 'Ce qui peut paraître paradoxal, c'est que pour abolir les divisions sexuées ou "genrées" de l'humanité, il faut d'abord approfondir cette division, la reconnaître pour ce qu'elle est'.[107] In other words, rather than ignoring social divisions, an attitude that sometimes accompanies the desire to avoid naming them, it is necessary to first elucidate the power relations at work in French society. This requires the employment of analytical tools that facilitate a more complex understanding of these issues. This thesis therefore adopts a non-essentialist understanding of concepts such as 'gender', 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'class' in the hope of contributing to intersectional research and movements that aim to dismantle the power relations and social divisions which they denote. As Crenshaw suggests, it is by examining and demarginalising the individual experiences of those who are often negatively affected by intersecting social hierarchies, such as ethnic minority women, that the greatest light can be shed on unequal power relations in order to challenge and transform them.[108]

Moreover, the shared goals of intersectionality and republican universalism make the former a useful approach to examine how and why universalist ideals are not enacted in French society. Niang's monograph demonstrates the relevance of this approach as it applies an intersectional lens to French literature and film to understand the experiences of black women in the *banlieues* in relation to republican universalism.[109] In light of the lack of research focusing on ethnic minority women and republican universalism generally and in NDiaye and Lê's works specifically, this thesis contributes to filling this gap in our knowledge within French and francophone, postcolonial and feminist studies. Examining the experiences of ethnic minority female characters with differing ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds in Lê and NDiaye's novels will build on Niang's work by exploring how republican universalist discourses function in alternative contexts as well as in the works of different authors. Considering the portrayals of Vietnamese characters' experiences in this way is particularly valuable as they have received less

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[107] Christine Delphy, 'Rapports de sexe et universalisme', in *Un universalisme si particulier: féminisme et exception française (1980-2010),* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 1995 (2010)), p.298; See also Mame-Fatou Niang, 'Fighting Racism Is What Makes Us Universalists', *Jacobin,* (2020) <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/10/france-racism-universalism-george-floyd-protests-afro-french?s=04> [accessed 05/10/2020].
[108] See Crenshaw (1989).
[109] See Mame-Fatou Niang, *Identités françaises : banlieues, féminités et universalisme*, (Brill-Rodopi, 2019) <file:///C:/Users/A/AppData/Local/Temp/[9789004407220%20-%20Identit%C3%A9s%20fran%C3%A7aises]%20Identit%C3%A9s%20fran%C3%A7aises.pdf> [accessed 14/10/1992].

critical attention than other minoritised groups. Although a greater awareness of the racism experienced by postcolonial minorities has meant that they have increasingly been the subject of research since the 2000s, Vietnamese minorities have often been overlooked because they are believed to be 'treated more as victims of communism than [France's] former colonial subjects'.[110] Examining NDiaye and Lê's portrayals of othering and oppression, and the relatively overlooked experiences of Vietnamese women in particular, can therefore provide a valuable contribution to knowledge about the subjective experience of intersectional discrimination as well as republican universalism in France.

Ultimately, the intersectional approach adopted in this thesis elucidates not only the gaps between universalist ideals and French society mentioned earlier but also the ways in which universalist discourses are depicted as channelling violence. This thesis argues that the characters' and authors' awareness of this phenomenon, and the intersectional power relations it facilitates, allows them to challenge this process within or through the novels. The next section sets out how the concept of intersectional feminist consciousness can be used to further our understanding of the novels and their portrayals of ethnic minority women and republican universalism.

Unveiling the Violence of Republican Universalist Discourses: Literature, Resistance and Promoting an Intersectional Feminist Consciousness

As part of their attempts to shed light on violence through their *œuvres*, Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê depict how it can be masked and perpetuated through ostensibly positive discourses. NDiaye states that '[t]out lecteur doit apprendre à se méfier de la douceur en littérature. C'est souvent grâce à elle que la violence cache son jeu'.[111] In other words, discourses or behaviour that appear gentle, positive or caring within literature, as in life, can camouflage discrimination or inequality. In an essay on how anger can be used creatively in writing, Lê argues that authors play an important role in the revolt against the violence that imbues normality: 'Ceux-là ont pour rôle d'empêcher l'homme de s'assoupir dans sa normalité. Leur colère, leur rage, leur furie, quel que soit le nom que nous donnons à leur révolte, est ce qui nous porte en avant, fait de nous des irréconciliés, des irrésignés, si les berceuses consolantes ne nous ont pas définitivement

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[110] Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck, 'Introduction: The Post-migratory Postcolonial', in *Post-migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France,* ed. by Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University press, 2018), p.5. A notable exception is the recent publication: Ya-Han Chuang, *Une minorité modèle ? : face au racisme antiasiatique en France*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2021). See also Inès Belgacem and Pierre Gautheron, '« Pourquoi le terme asiophobie n'existe pas ? »', (09/10/2017) <https://www.streetpress.com/sujet/1507539159-communaute-asiatique-marre-fermer-sa-gueule> [accessed 18/01/2021].

[111] NDiaye (03/11/2009).

endormis'.[112] Writers can use their anger at injustice to enlighten us about the real nature of normality and combat the lethargy established through deceptive but comforting narratives which mask its violence. In turn, this can help readers to rebel against the everyday forms of violence which have been normalised and internalised, thereby opening up new potential futures.

The authors' conceptions of violence can be compared to Ahmed's notion of intersectional feminist consciousness that emphasises the need to understand how violent power relations can be reproduced through the notions of civility, love or happiness. As this awareness is, as Ahmed demonstrates, necessary to resist these power relations, developing an intersectional feminist consciousness and helping others in this endeavour is an integral aspect of intersectionality if it is to achieve its goals of illuminating and dismantling intersecting systems of domination. This thesis proposes that Lê and NDiaye's writing helps to stimulate this kind of intersectional feminist consciousness and can thus be located within this general movement. It argues that they employ techniques such as imagery, irony, intertextuality and the fantastic to expose how republican universalist discourses can conceal and perpetuate structural racism and sexism in French society.

Discrimination and inequality in contemporary French society can be linked to historical contradictions within republican universalism. The denial of equality to women after the Revolution, for example, was rationalised through the argument that they were dependents who lacked the autonomy seen as a 'prerequisite for individuality' and that, as a result of their particularities, they were not susceptible to abstraction.[113] In this way, republican universalism was used to designate women as irreducibly particular to symbolically exclude them from the universal and deny them equal rights. Beyond the metropole, colonial subjects who were racialised as inferior and less civilised were given French nationality but generally refused citizenship and the equality and freedom it supposedly conferred.[114] This creation of 'particular' rather than 'universal' second-class citizens and colonial subjects reveals the divisions present within the Republic from its inception and the fact that these were not the result of external threats but of discrimination perpetuated through a supposedly liberating and egalitarian ideology. Similarly, NDiaye and Lê's novels convey not only the gap that exists between republican universalist ideals and the reality in French society but how universalist discourses are employed to obscure and hinder resistance to intersectional social hierarchies nowadays. To set out the

[112] Linda Lê, *Toutes les colères du monde*, (Kindle ebook: Les Éditions du Cerf 2021), p.80.
[113] Scott (2005), p.37.
[114] Didier Fassin, 'Introduction', in *Les nouvelles frontières de la société française,* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), p.7.

relevance and originality of this argument and approach, this section reviews previous research into the masking of violence and the concept of consciousness upon which this project builds.

Although hypocrisy is a recurring theme across Lê's *œuvre* and the author signals this herself, Isabelle's Favre's article on schizophrenia in *Calomnies* is the only research to date to consider it in any depth. Favre maintains that the uncle's madness and existential crisis are caused by the monstrous duplicity of his Vietnamese family and French society, made evident through the ironic tone of the narration. She argues that the niece's chapters unveil the hypocrisy prevalent within the French literary and publishing sphere specifically. In particular, she suggests that they denounce how power relations are maintained through the infantilisation of the author-protagonist as her publishers 's'auto-assigne[nt] les bénéfices moraux d'une mission parentale bienveillante et salvatrice, reléguant l'autre dans le rôle du protégé'.[115] By conceiving the niece as their protégé and employing narratives about saving or guiding her, these men rationalise their control and influence over her in a way that masks the inequalities this creates. My analysis of this and other novels by Lê establishes how this example forms part of a broader critique of hypocrisy as this kind of paternalism is present in most of the ethnic minority female characters' relationships, both personal and professional, with the ethnic majority. Further, although it takes multiple forms, this paternalism is shaped by the intersections of the ethnic majority French characters' racism and sexism.

Considering the discourses used by the characters to justify their condescending attitude and behaviour towards ethnic minority women in relation to the socio-political context also makes it possible to outline how they form part of the modern *mission civilisatrice* described earlier. The colonial *mission civilisatrice* was characterised by duplicity because, whilst represented as paving the way to citizenship and equality for colonised subjects, the vast majority were not given the education necessary for assimilation and were then denied citizenship because they were 'insufficiently acculturated'.[116] In reality, the promise of political equality through assimilation was always hollow as it would have 'destroyed the very foundations of the colonial system' of such economic value to France.[117] Likewise, Lê exposes how ethnic majority characters use the promise of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* to direct the niece and other ethnic minority female characters on a path of 'integration' which subjugates these women. The hypocrisy involved is twofold as this is not only an oppressive rather than liberating process but the persistence of racism and sexism in French society means that, regardless of whether they submit to their

[115] Isabelle Favre, *Guerre et paix. Figures du conflit dans les littératures et films francophones*, (Limoges: Presses universitaires de Limoges, 2018), p.128.
[116] Hargreaves (2007), p.150.
[117] Ibid.

French 'teachers', these women will never be integrated as equals. In this vein, Lê highlights how deceptive universalist discourses and arguments, that bear various similarities with the imperialist *mission civilisatrice*, can be mobilised to mask and reproduce intersectional discrimination and inequality in modern-day France.

An element within NDiaye's works which is relevant to understanding how violence can be concealed is the 'non-dit' around discrimination in French society. In her analysis of *En famille*, Clarisse Behar argues that the ethnic majority characters' use of euphemistic phrases such as 'singularité' indicates their racialisation of ethnic minority characters like Fanny and their conceptualisation of the nation as white.[118] As the use of such circumlocutory expressions camouflages this exclusionary racialisation, Behar notes that the ethnic majority are able to construct the nation as white whilst also denying that this is the case through language that appears to respect abstraction. This thesis builds upon Behar's research by considering how other universalist concepts and discourses are employed in ways that create a 'non dit' not only about racism but also about sexism and their intersections in French society. This exposes how, as in Lê's works, the promise or hope of freedom, equality and fraternity through integration leads to NDiaye's ethnic minority female characters accepting and perpetuating sex and race-based oppression. The duplicitous suggestion that the deferral of these universalist promises is the result of the ethnic minority female characters' failures to fulfil the supposedly universal duties that accompany citizenship also makes it harder for them to perceive and resist the power relations functioning through republican universalist discourses.

This thesis proposes that, by illuminating how republican universalism can channel intersectional violence, the authors are expressing and encouraging an intersectional feminist consciousness through their novels. The idea that NDiaye and Lê's works, or particular elements of them, depict or constitute a critical consciousness has been explored elsewhere. Applying Ana Vásquez and Ana Maria Araujo's concept of 'double exile' to Lê's novels, Averis argues that Lê's ethnic minority female characters have a greater awareness of the alienating sex-based power structures of the host nation because of their experience of patriarchy in their homeland. She states that this consciousness and doubled distance from the power structures in the new host country enables women to seek out a more productive, in-between space which eschews these structures: 'This 'double exile' places women at a greater distance from the centres of power, in an autonomous site of alterity in which historical schemas and conventions can be bypassed or

[118] See Clarissa Behar, 'Écrire en pays à majorité blanche : *En famille* de Marie NDiaye', in *Une femme puissante,* ed. by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

dismantled'.[119] In the case of Sola from *In memoriam*, Averis suggests that this allows her to renegotiate her identity through writing in a way which refuses fixed sites based on nation, gender or sexuality.[120]

In another article, Anh Thang Dao proposes that the ethnic minority protagonists of *Calomnies* develop an 'exilic sensibility'. She argues that Lê's writing challenges the cosmopolitan conception of exile as an in-between or Third space of freedom by portraying how her exiled characters are constrained by the normative influences of both the home and host-lands.[121] Further, Dao underlines how Lê's work reveals the hypocritical employment of 'freedom' in this process as it is depicted as dependent upon the full assimilation of French norms and abandonment of the homeland and culture. It is through gaining awareness of this form of 'unfreedom', Dao notes, that the characters gain an exilic sensibility which refuses to 'remember the homeland as a place to return, or to regard the new country as a place of safety'.[122] This sensibility subsequently enables them to reject conformity to the constraints of both nations to instead engage in 'a practice of freedom that lies outside the framework of the nation-state'.[123]

This project builds upon both Averis and Dao's arguments in several ways. It establishes how multiple concepts relating to integration and republican universalism, as well as the promise of freedom, are imbricated in the reproduction of patriarchal and ethnocentric power relations in Lê's novels. For example, it illustrates how the idea that ethnic minorities need to display their deservingness of perpetually deferred universalist rights and belonging is employed to encourage conformity with gendered and racialised social norms. This problematises Dao's conclusion that integration necessarily involves assimilation in novels like *Calomnies* by identifying how the conditions of worthiness can vary as some characters, fetishising the niece as exotic, expect her to retain her cultural differences. Consciousness of the role of republican universalist discourses in subjugating the niece also calls into question Averis' argument that experiencing patriarchy in the homeland facilitates resistance to it in exile. Indeed, I expose how the desire to flee the influence of her Vietnamese family and culture makes the niece more vulnerable to racist and sexist

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[119] Averis, (2011) p.33.
[120] Linda Lê, *In memoriam*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2007).
[121] Other research which considers Lê's work in relation to the 'Third space' conceived by Homi Bhabha include Ravi (2003); Emily Vaughan Roberts, 'A Vietnamese Voice in the Dark: Three stages in the Corpus of Linda Lê', in *Francophone Post-Colonial Cultures,* ed. by Kamal Salhi (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003). For an analysis of the limitations of employing the 'Third Space' to analyse the literature of ethnic minorities in France see Alison Marmont, 'French or Francophone: Postcolonial Immigrant Identities and Literature in Contemporary France', *Xanthos: A Journal of Foreign Literatures and Languages,* 1 (2019) <http://xanthosjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/03-marmont.pdf>.
[122] Anh Thang Dao, 'Exile of Freedom: The Nation-State and Exile in Linda Lê's *Slander*', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique,* 20:3 (2012), pp.714-15.
[123] Ibid. p.725.

exploitation in France because of her eagerness to believe the false promises of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* promoted by the ethnic majority men in her life.[124] As a result, this thesis demonstrates how Lê portrays resistance to unequal power relations as reliant upon the ability to understand how republican universalist ideals facilitate inequality, rather than just an awareness of how patriarchy functions in the homeland. Finally, it reveals how Lê, by stimulating an intersectional feminist consciousness through her works, challenges these kinds of patriarchal and ethnocentric power relations and the hypocritical discourses employed to reproduce them.

Previous research into NDiaye's novels identifies her use of genre, specifically the fantastic or magic realism, as a means to create awareness of the violence explored in the novel and its impact. In her analysis of *En famille*, Deborah Gaensbauer argues that Fanny's social withdrawal, self-destructive behaviour, and sensations of shame, among others, manifest how she is traumatised by the exclusion and sexual violence she experiences. As this is often conveyed through the fantastic, including Fanny's uncanny transformations and the confusion between fiction and reality, Gaensbauer concludes that the fantastic functions as a '"voix de femme", making explicit and contesting the kinds of biases affecting women's experiences of trauma'.[125] Similarly, Katherine Roussos proposes that NDiaye employs magic realism in novels such as *La Sorcière* as an alternative mode of writing and perceiving the world that challenges patriarchal discourses by illuminating the subjective, invisible and silenced experiences of the imaginary and of emotions. She demonstrates how magic realism highlights the discrimination that the female protagonists face and how their relegation to the domestic sphere within nuclear families restricts their social mobility. However, Roussos notes that magic realism does not offer solutions to these issues as the ethnic minority female characters' submission, magical rebellion or adoption of masculine behaviours do not free them from restrictive patriarchal systems. Magic realism therefore functions principally as a 'langage pour véhiculer l'indicible' surrounding power structures and their impact.[126]

My examination of NDiaye and Lê's novels reveals that the fantastic is just one of various literary tools that express and can therefore stimulate an intersectional feminist consciousness of how the ethnic minority female characters are traumatised and also trapped and silenced by mutually imbricated gender and race-based power relations. For example, intertextuality with

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[124] Kate Averis, 'Transposing Gender in the Diaspora: Linda Lê's *Les aubes* (2000) and *In memoriam* (2007)', *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies,* (2018) <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/5735> [accessed 03/06/2020].
[125] Deborah Gaensbauer, 'Further Outside the Bounds: Mobilization of the Fantastic as Trauma Narrative in Marie NDiaye's *En Famille*', in *Redefining the Real: The Fantastic in Contemporary Women's Writing,* ed. by Margaret-Anne Hutton (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p.221.
[126] Katherine Roussos, *Décoloniser l'imaginaire : du réalisme magique chez Maryse Condé, Sylvie Germain et Marie NDiaye*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), p.225.

Don Quijote de la Mancha in *En famille* illustrates how the universalist quest for justice by minorities can be manipulated to ensure their socio-economic immobility in French society. Meanwhile, the italicised passages in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* indicate Nadia's internalisation of, and subsequent complicity with, racist and sexist attitudes often imbricated in universalist discourses. The novels thus encourage consciousness of how, even as ethnic minority female characters attempt to resist unequal power structures, discourses intended to create equality can lead to their complicity in perpetuating inegalitarian social systems.

This thesis therefore builds upon previous research considering isolated concepts such as abstraction, integration and freedom in Lê and NDiaye's works to expose how these universalist notions are portrayed as forming part of a larger discursive structure through which intersectional social hierarchies can be maintained. As such, the novelists contradict arguments that the failure of French society to fully uphold its universalist ideals can only be the result of external threats, such as Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism and 'communautarisme'. Indeed, they reveal how republican universalism has been employed in divisive and exploitative ways from the Revolution to the present day, within and beyond France's borders. In this vein, Lê and NDiaye apply an intersectional feminist consciousness within their *œuvres* to simultaneously illuminate and defy the hypocritical discourses and inegalitarian processes shaping French society. In order to illustrate how such conclusions can be drawn from the novels, the following section summarises the approach taken within each of the literary analysis chapters.

Chapter Summaries

The main arguments of this thesis are developed through three chapters analysing a selection of novels and short stories including NDiaye's *En famille* and *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and Lê's 'L'Encrier', *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot*. These have been selected because of the insights they offer into the experiences of the ethnic minority female characters in France; the attitudes and behaviours of the ethnic majority characters towards them; and the functioning of republican universalist discourses in relation to both. Another factor relating to the choice of Lê's last two works is her portrayal of Vietnamese exiles, whose experiences, as noted earlier, have often received little critical attention. By focusing on female characters with Asian origins, this project makes a valuable contribution to research on the specific experiences of these ethnic minority women as depicted in literature. The first chapter compares NDiaye and Lê's depictions of discrimination and universalist abstraction within the novels whilst the second and third chapters, dedicated to Lê and NDiaye's works respectively, analyse how inequality and integration are explored. Firstly, the separation of the two authors' novels in chapters two and three makes it possible to explore these concepts and the novels in greater detail. Secondly, the adoption of a similar theoretical

framework highlights the similarities as well as the divergences between the works examined. Further, although the three chapters focus upon the concepts of abstraction and discrimination together before moving onto integration and inequality, these four issues are all interwoven in republican universalist discourses and in the novels themselves. As such, the analyses themselves explore the intersections of all of these themes within the texts and their context. Finally, the various theoretical concepts applied in each chapter contribute to the overarching intersectional framework that focuses upon demarginalisation, contextualisation and elucidating the relationship between individuals' experiences and structural power relations.

The first chapter analyses the experiences of Nadia in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and *l'étrangère* from the short story 'L'Encrier' in relation to discrimination and abstraction. The theoretical framework is based on the concepts of marking and stranger fetishism proposed by Colette Guillaumin and Sara Ahmed respectively, as well as Julia Kristeva's notion of abstraction. While the first two account for how socially constructed identities are imposed upon women and ethnic minorities in ways that reproduce power relations, Ahmed's concept explains how such processes are often implicated in nation-building as some people associate themselves with the nation by fetishising others as strangers. These concepts make it possible to demonstrate how the novels' female protagonists are gendered and fetishised as strangers in French society. Although incompatible with universalist abstraction, characters who implicitly or explicitly espouse republican universalism are often engaged in this process. Furthermore, by depicting ethnic minority women as a tolerable commodity or an object of abjection, marking and stranger fetishism produce images of the national and universal body as white, and white and male, respectively. Employing this intersectional feminist lens reveals how the discourses of difference-blindness and republican universalism are mobilised to facilitate this process and mask French society's failure to enact its universalist principles. Finally, the chapter exposes how the authors employ the fantastic to reject a reductive victim discourse by portraying the characters' complicity in or resistance to the marking and fetishising process. This highlights how, through blurring the boundaries of realism by integrating fantastic elements into their works, the authors challenge the reductive categorisations imposed upon their ethnic minority female characters in French society.

The second chapter proposes that the intertextuality of Lê's *Calomnies* (1993) and *Les dits d'un idiot* (1995) with the Greek mythological figures of Pygmalion and Galatea is used to explore the restrictive directionality of the integration process and, therefore, develop a feminist consciousness. It applies Marilyn Frye's conceptualisation of oppression as a restrictive moulding process and Ahmed's notion of power as a form of intersectional directionality, whereby gendered and racialised norms are masked and reproduced by deceptive promises, threats and

arguments. This chapter examines how the ethnic minority female characters' attitudes and actions are restrictively moulded: Pygmalion figures and discourses attempt to transform the female characters into silent and immobile statues who meet society's ideals for the perfect ethnic minority woman. Moreover, it demonstrates how these Pygmalion figures conceal and channel this violence through universalist promises of equality, freedom and fraternity through integration into French society. This chapter also interrogates how the female characters' internalisation of Pygmalion's discourses, often similar to those within republican universalism, impedes their ability to resist oppressive power relations. Ultimately, it reveals how an intersectional feminist consciousness is stimulated through Lê's works and how the extent to which her ethnic minority female characters succeed in overcoming Pygmalion's moulding-integration is dependent on their ability to develop such consciousness.

The third literary analysis chapter also deploys directionality and Frye's conception of oppression to gain insights into the experiences of Fanny, the protagonist of NDiaye's *En famille*. It draws out the metaphors of prisons, paths and walls that NDiaye creates in the novel to explore the ways in which Fanny is oppressed and how this relates to the way she is gendered and racialised by her own white family and French society generally. In particular, I expose how the republican universalist concepts of integration, worthiness and reciprocal rights and duties function to justify, conceal and perpetuate her oppression. The chapter then examines how Fanny's internalisation of such discourses leads to her complicity in restricting her own behaviour and attitudes and mistreating other ethnic minority characters. This reveals not only the disjuncture between the experiences of the ethnic minority women portrayed in the novels and the promises of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* but also how republican universalist discourses are mobilised to deny and reproduce unequal power relations in modern French society. Whilst Fanny fails to grasp the complex reality of the power relations she tries to resist, NDiaye's novel can generate an awareness of the restrictive nature of intersectional social hierarchies and the duplicity present in the universalist discourses employed to perpetuate them. In this way, it elucidates the challenges faced by minorities and the French nation as a whole as it grapples with its ideals and how to create a more egalitarian and cohesive society.

Literature, Intersectionality and the Construction of New Narratives

In adopting an intersectional theoretical framework this thesis sets out not to create categories or sow division but rather to expose their production and consequences in French society. My analysis of Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's novels reveals that, although their characters have very different origins, they paint a similar picture of the intersecting racialised and gendered social hierarchies they face. They thus elucidate not only the experiences of ethnic minority women as

socially-constructed categories are imposed upon them but also how this violent intersectional process is implicated in the power relations shaping French society as a whole. Furthermore, they depict this not as a mere failure of republican universalism but as a product of universalist discourses when they are made to channel such violence. The novels therefore challenge the prevailing doxa about the inclusive and egalitarian function of republican universalism in France by shedding light on the violence and unjust social hierarchies it helps to perpetuate when associated with exclusionary conceptualisations of both the national and the universal.

Ultimately, one of the main issues raised through this intersectional reading of NDiaye and Lê's novels is the role of narratives in shaping reality. Their works reveal how a misleading narrative about republican universalism, particularly the idea that universalist ideals and rights are upheld in France, not only fails to tackle but actually contributes to discrimination and inequality. In light of this, the creation of new narratives through a variety of mediums, including literature, can play a fundamental role not only in unveiling but also resisting such violence. This thesis is based on the idea that literature should not be divorced from the context in which it is written but, instead, that understanding the dialogue between the two can illuminate both. In the case of NDiaye and Lê's novels, it proposes that they simultaneously illustrate the deceptive nature of the promises *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* in French society and convey the possibility of constructing new narratives and, consequently, futures.

Chapter One – Intersectional Marking and Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's Subversion of the Universalist Abstraction Myth

More than two centuries since it was first enshrined in the foundational text the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, universalism remains an integral part of republican discourse from the late 1980s to the present day and is considered fundamental to the values of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.[1] In particular, the vision of the citizen as a universal and abstract subject, whose identitarian affiliations can be respected but also surpassed, is depicted as key to the upholding of these human rights.[2] Although certain members of French society, including women, Jews and slaves, have been denied full access to these rights in the past, proposed amendments to the French Constitution of 1958 that were unanimously passed by the *Assemblée nationale* in 2018 explicitly promise equality under the law, 'sans distinction de sexe, d'origine ou de religion', to those implicitly excluded from the realm of the universal in previous constitutions.[3] The attribution of any threat to abstraction to external sources, particularly Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism, conveys the faith in both republican universalist ideals and their enactment in French society.[4] However, as equality was withheld in the past because of the supposed incompatibility of certain differences with abstraction, it is important to gauge the extent to which the theoretical universality of all citizens is a reality in French society and, if not, why this is the case.[5]

This chapter demonstrates how the ethnic minority female characters of Marie NDiaye's *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and Linda Lê's short story 'L'Encrier', in *Autres jeux avec le feu*, are denied

[1] An official 2018 report describes France as being 'attachée au respect et à l'universalité des droits de l'Homme pour tous les individus'. See L'Observatoire de la laïcité, 'Rapport annuel 2017-2018', (2018) <https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/contenu/piece-jointe/2018/05/laicite_rapport_annuel_2017-2018_v9-web_0.pdf> [accessed 04/12/2019] (p.275).

[2] For example, 'le principe d'égalité républicaine de tous les citoyens […] invite justement à dépasser le cadre de nos affiliations particulières' in Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI), 'Une culture ouverte dans une République indivisible : les choix de l'intégration culturelle', (2012) <http://archives.hci.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Une_culture_ouverte_29112012.pdf> [accessed 04/12/2019] (p.105).

[3] See Le Monde avec AFP, 'L'Assemblée supprime de la Constitution le mot « race » et interdit la « distinction de sexe »', *Le Monde,* (12/07/2018) <https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/07/12/l-assemblee-supprime-dans-la-constitution-le-mot-race-et-interdit-la-distinction-de-sexe_5330615_823448.html> [accessed 04/12/2019].

[4] For more information on this argument, see 'Abstraction and Integration' in the Introduction.

[5] See the 'Unveiling the Violence of Republican Universalist Discourses' in the Introduction and Scott's analysis of how women were denied equal rights after the Revolution in Scott (2005).

symbolic universality in French society.[6] It exposes how the intersectional racism and sexism faced by Nadia and *l'étrangère*, respectively, produces them as particular and inferior rather than abstract. It is therefore focused on, in the same way as Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of 'representational intersectionality', scrutinising how ethnic minority women are culturally constructed 'through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender'.[7] In order to achieve this, this chapter adopts an intersectional analytical framework based upon Colette Guillaumin's concept of marking and Sara Ahmed's notion of stranger fetishism. Whilst the former considers how women and black people during the slave trade have been subject to a 'socio-symbolic system of marks put on special groups', the latter highlights how the essentialist and homogenising construction of ethnic minorities as foreigners to be either welcomed into or excluded from the nation produces them as perpetual strangers.[8] These concepts account for the ways in which marking and stranger fetishism are both the product of, and a means of reproducing, intersectional social hierarchies.

The intersectional theoretical lens adopted in this chapter makes it possible to offer various new insights into the novels, including in relation to previous research that signals the importance of marking in NDiaye's work.[9] The first section examines two contrasting examples of how Nadia and *l'étrangère* are treated as a pariah or an exotic commodity, respectively, and how both are the result of an inferiorising stranger fetishism that marks these women as particular. The different narrative perspectives mean that both sections on 'L'Encrier' reveal how *l'étrangère* is gendered and racialised, whilst the manner in which Nadia's racialisation is inflected by the way she is also gendered is considered in the second section of this thesis. Examining how abstraction is superficially respected underscores how the novels convey not only the disjuncture between republican universalist ideals and the cultural construction of ethnic minority women in France but also how universalist discourses can facilitate widespread intersectional discrimination.

The second section expands on the analysis of the marking process to argue that marking these women because of their gender and ethnicity creates symbolic borders between the universal and the particular, the nation and the stranger. With reference to Julia Kristeva's concept, it demonstrates how producing these women as threatening or barbarous 'objects of abjection' reinforces these symbolic borders and the intersectional social hierarchies in which

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[6] The analysis of *Mon Cœur à l'étroit* builds upon some elements from my previous publication: Alison Marmont, 'Marie NDiaye's *My Heart Hemmed In*: A Call for the Reappraisal of the Frontiers of Difference', *Question: Essays and Art from the Humanities,* 3 (2019) <https://www.questionjournal.com/issue-3> [accessed 24/05/2021].
[7] Crenshaw (1991), pp.1245, 83.
[8] Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), p.138; Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London: Routledge, 2000).
[9] See Asibong (2013); Bujor, (2018).

they are imbricated.[10] This demonstrates how the authors portray the increasing xenophobia and violence which Nadia and *l'étrangère* negotiate in French society as emerging from the latent fetishisation of ethnic minorities. Whilst this analysis considers how the authors challenge the marking process by illuminating how it is socially constructed but not determinative, it also explores how the texts and characters further undermine its exclusionary mechanisms by refusing the hatred and abjection involved or by breaking down symbolic borders such as those of life and death.

The third and final section demonstrates how adopting an intersectional analysis of discrimination makes it possible to differentiate between the different kinds of symbolic borders shaping French society; namely, those of the national and universal. A comparison of Nadia and *l'étrangère*'s experiences with those of Rosie in NDiaye's *Rosie Carpe* (2001) and Vega from Lê's *Les aubes* (2000) reveals that the marking process excludes Nadia and *l'étrangère* not only from a racialised universal body but also from gendered as well as racialised national body. On the one hand, this reveals the importance of understanding the different cultural construction of the national and the universal in an ethnocentric and patriarchal French society to comprehend the experiences of those marginalised in this process, such as ethnic minority women. On the other hand, it indicates how intersectional analyses can offer valuable insights more generally into republican universalism, systems of domination and the ways they might be interwoven.

Mon cœur à l'étroit is written from Nadia's perspective as she and others are suddenly and unexpectedly treated like pariahs in her hometown of Bordeaux. Whilst she is repeatedly mistreated, her husband Ange, a primary teacher like Nadia, is seemingly stabbed by his own pupils. Just as Ange's wound festers and will not heal, hostility towards Nadia continues to the extent that she flees the country to join her estranged son in a country named only as C. By confronting repressed memories of her childhood, including her abandonment of her ethnic minority family, Nadia becomes aware of the violence faced by ethnic minorities and her complicity in this through her own attempt to be included and respected in French society. Unlike most of NDiaye's characters, however, she is able to reunite with her own family, but loses her husband, her job and her French middle-class lifestyle in the process. One particular encounter in which Nadia is fetishised and spat upon by a stranger in the street will be used as a pivot from which to explore the significance of Nadia's experiences throughout the novel. The first section examines how she is among many who are racialised whilst the second reveals how she is produced as an object of abjection in France and the ways in which this is also shaped by the way she is gendered.

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[10] Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1980).

Lê's as yet unexamined short story 'L'Encrier' depicts how the unnamed male narrator falls in love with a foreign girl, whom he refers to as *l'étrangère*, and then becomes involved in her brutal murder. Disillusioned because she elopes with his best friend and because he feels unvalued in his role as a teacher in the *banlieues*, he finds a sense of belonging and purpose when he becomes a speech-writer for an extreme-right political party headed by the *Chef*. As his hatred and jealousy fester he becomes increasingly radicalised and employs his influence within the party to have his former beloved abducted by a group of fanatical men who, ultimately, get carried away and murder her by stabbing her thirteen times. The narrator is eventually driven mad by *l'étrangère*'s ghostly voice emanating from the ink well she had given him and he ends up killing the leader of the party. This chapter first exposes how the narrator's love for *l'étrangère* displays the welcoming stranger fetishism outlined by Ahmed and how this is also present in other works such as *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien*.[11] The second section then analyses how this facilitates the narrator's transformation of *l'étrangère* and other ethnic minority women into objects of abjection by associating them with barbarism in the *Chef*'s political speeches and how Lê employs the fantastic to subvert such discourses.

The Indelible Marking of Ethnic Minority Women

The concept of 'marking' is one which appears explicitly across both NDiaye and Lê's *œuvres* and shapes the experiences of Nadia and *l'étrangère* in *Mon Cœur à l'étroit* and 'L'Encrier'. This section elucidates how the authors use simple examples, such as reactions to how their ethnic minority female characters smile, to illustrate how these women are marked with ethnic and, in the case of *l'étrangère*, sex-based difference.[12] This reveals the inferiorising and dehumanising nature of this process as it assigns them to a supposedly homogenous and irreconcilable difference that is commodified, tolerated or, failing this, violently rejected. Further, it highlights how the physical and symbolic violence these women experience occurs not just in spite of republican universalism but is often justified through it as this racism, and sexism, mark them out as particular rather than universal subjects.

Ethnocentrism and Stranger Fetishism in Marie NDiaye's *Mon cœur à l'étroit*

One of the earliest scenes in Marie NDiaye's *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, in which Nadia is assaulted by a stranger on the streets of Bordeaux, encapsulates and can therefore elucidate some of the novel's

[11] Lê (2020).
[12] The way in which Nadia is gendered is explored in the section 'Expelling the Abject and Reproducing Intersectional Social Hierarchies' in this chapter.

main themes. Whilst Nadia and Ange are walking home from the school at which they both teach, Nadia receives a hostile and aggressive response from a young man at whom she smiles:

- Tu m'as regardé? Tu m'as souri? De quel droit tu me souris, saleté?

Je peux lire dans ses jolis yeux allongés une appréhension qui me surprend. Elle ne me rassure pas. Au contraire, ma propre peur s'en trouve accrue.

- Je ne sais pas, dis-je. Pardon, pardon. Vraiment, dis-je, je ne sais pas.

- Ah oui, bon sang, tu ne sais pas, dit-il.

Il fait vers moi la moitié d'un pas. Ses lèvres sont bleues de froid et de colère. Une forte vapeur s'en échappe dont je peux maintenant sentir la tiédeur sur mon visage. Il penche la tête en arrière puis la ramène brusquement et crache sur mon front.[13]

This short passage distils the atmosphere in Bordeaux during the novel as various other encounters reveal that the stranger's hostile and even fearful attitude towards Nadia is common.[14] Similarly, Nadia repeatedly experiences the same sense of both fear and confusion because she does not know, or refuses to consciously acknowledge, why she is being treated in this way. Violence also appears throughout the novel as Ange is stabbed, Nadia's ex-husband is murdered and it is suggested that Nadia's daughter-in-law might also have been killed by her son's current lover. Yet the stranger's assault is particularly shocking because the reason for the stranger's behaviour is unclear at this point in the narrative. His motivation becomes progressively more apparent and one element which sheds light on this is NDiaye's narrative framing of this scene. Firstly, it is preceded by Nadia's reflections on how she and Ange have been receiving hostile looks, 'on me regarde de travers', from people at the school where they work and even strangers in the street.[15] This sudden change in attitudes leads her to think that she or her husband must have done something to justify this hostility: 'Qu'ai je donc fait, et à qui?'.[16] This conjecture is later reinforced through Ange's euphemistic assertion that they are being punished for a mistake that they have made.[17]

Another scene that frames the assault is the subsequent discovery that Ange was stabbed at the school and Nadia's encounter with a pharmacist in Bordeaux when she tries to buy him compresses. The pharmacist is the mother of one of Nadia's pupils and expresses her disapproval that Ange has been attacked. In a long and extended example of periphrasis she explains to Nadia that it is the natural result of 'la répulsion pleine de ressentiment que tout un chacun s'est mis à

[13] NDiaye (2007), pp.15-16.
[14] The reason behind and role played by the stranger's emotions is considered further in the second section examining abjection.
[15] NDiaye (2007), p.9.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid. p.102.

éprouver envers des gens tels que vous et votre mari'.[18] The increasingly widespread nature of this hostility in Bordeaux is highlighted by NDiaye in the way that various different sectors and institutions are portrayed as sharing this view and playing a role in the violent marginalisation linked to it. For example, other characters repeatedly warn Nadia against taking Ange to their doctor because he hates 'les gens comme vous' and implicitly suggest would be murdered if he went to hospital.[19] Similarly, Nadia witnesses the police officer Lanton, her son's former lover, show disdain towards people similar to her and he explains that 'les gens comme vous ne sont pas en odeur de sainteté…'.[20] When the train which Nadia takes to flee the country is inexplicably halted, a woman called Nathalie, who helps her to continue her journey, adopts the same phrase in relation to the injustice that Nadia faces in France. Phrases like 'les gens tels que vous' convey how Nadia's marginalisation is linked to the way these characters assign Nadia to a group with which they do not identify, although Nadia herself denies and rejects this imposed identity.[21] Furthermore, NDiaye's assignment of such phrases to this range of characters reveals that this attitude has become institutionalised as it permeates public life in schools, law enforcement, public transport and the health system throughout France as well as in Bordeaux.

Yet the circumlocutory style of such phrases and the characters' discourses generally leaves the nature of this collective identity open to interpretation, making it unclear whether it refers to an identity based on actions or a social category. Chloé Brendlé identifies the pharmacist's phrase as part of a 'discours-en-creux' which pervades NDiaye's fiction and reflects how stereotyping functions through 'l'occultation paradoxale': 'Désigner tout en ne désignant pas, dire sans maudire: *tourner autour du pot* est une façon aussi bien d'éviter ce qui dérange que d'entériner ce qui ne serait pas acceptable dans une formulation directe'.[22] Such phrases therefore constitute a politically correct 'non-dit' surrounding a politically incorrect stigmatisation and, as such, a paradoxical concealment of this very stigmatisation.[23] This indicates that the general alteration in attitudes towards Nadia and Ange, and therefore the behaviour of Ange's pupils and the stranger in the street, is linked to this stereotyping. Whilst the 'non-dit' surrounding this process makes it harder for Nadia to comprehend, the aggression of strangers towards Nadia reveals that the change in attitudes cannot be linked to the couple's actions or

[18] Ibid. p.34.
[19] Ibid. pp.235, 25.
[20] Ibid. pp.135, 39.
[21] My analysis of such euphemisms as 'people like you' in this chapter builds upon my article Marmont (2019), p.51.
[22] Chloé Brendlé, 'Lieux communs en héritage : de Flaubert à Marie NDiaye, de quoi sont-ils le nom ?', in *Flaubert, Beckett, NDiaye: The Aesthetics, Emotions and Politics of Failure,* ed. by Andrew Asibong and Aude Campmas (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p.54. Original emphasis.
[23] Ibid.

'mistake' alone, as these would not be apparent to strangers. This fact, along with the collective identity conveyed by phrases such as 'des gens tels que vous', suggests that the assault occurs because the stranger first imposes a group belonging on Nadia because of her appearance.

Initially, Nadia cannot understand who it is she is supposed to be like or to which group she supposedly belongs: 'je n'ai aucune idée de ce que je suis ni d'un quelconque corps d'individus auquel j'appartiendrais'.[24] However, her own attempts to verbalise her experience illuminate the relationship between the difference which seems visible to the stranger and the collective identity with which she is associated. She explains to her ex-husband that he, along with her and Ange, is 'marqué'.[25] This idea appears multiple times in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and across NDiaye's oeuvre and Andrew Asibong argues that most of her protagonists feel that they are the victims of an inescapable and 'hateful social mark'.[26] Examining NDiaye's use of this term in relation to its conceptualisation in postcolonial and feminist theory can elucidate her portrayal of Nadia's experiences in modern day Bordeaux and France. In *Le Portrait du colonisé* (1985), Albert Memmi explores the relationship between the coloniser and colonised to offer 'une définition du racisme en relation avec la domination d'un groupe par un autre'.[27] He argues that the coloniser imposes a racist and dehumanising 'marque du pluriel' upon colonised people which denies their individuality through 'la noyade dans le collectif anonyme'.[28] Although Memmi applies this term to the experiences of racialised colonised people in particular, 'la marque du pluriel' expresses how the individuality of any person is denied through being associated with and limited to a group identity. For example, Colette Guillaumin argues that women have also been marked as different and limited to their sex or gender in France.[29] Whilst Nadia's experience of marginalisation in the novel is shaped by her gender, her inclusion of her ex-husband in her interpretation of 'les gens tels que vous' suggests that their ostracism in French society and the stranger's assault is linked to another kind of mark of collective identity.[30]

Although shrouded by a 'non-dit', Marie NDiaye conveys the connotation of this mark through Nadia's own thought process, triggered by her marginalisation. This is evident in the phrases or passages in italics that interrupt the main narrative and constitute, as Dominique Rabaté suggests, 'la perte de contrôle du personnage qui paraît céder sous la pression du

[24] NDiaye (2007), p.139.
[25] Ibid. p.215.
[26] Asibong (2013), p.19.
[27] Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précedé de Portrait du colonisateur*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p.14.
[28] Ibid. p.115.
[29] Guillaumin (1995).
[30] The way Nadia's experiences are shaped by the way she is gendered is explored in the second section.

surgissement d'un refoulé trop longtemps contenu'.[31] Through these uncontrolled mental slippages we learn that, in contrast to her middle-class lifestyle with Ange in the centre of Bordeaux, Nadia was brought up by working-class parents in Aubiers, a poor outer suburb of Bordeaux.[32] References to her parents' different language and religion, the fragrant spices used in her mother's cooking and the way she covers her hair also highlight the cultural differences between Nadia's old and new life.[33] Taken together, these ethnic differences suggest that Nadia's parents come from Africa and perhaps, like many immigrants in France, from former French colonies in the Maghreb.[34] This is reinforced through the decision by Nadia's son's Ralph to name his daughter Souhar, a name with North African origins.[35] The link between these foreign origins and marking is hinted at when Nadia wonders if her granddaughter is '*marquée de trop de signes gênants?*'.[36] Her application of this term to her granddaughter long after she first uses it to understand the marginalisation she faces conveys her realisation that, as relatives, they have both been marked with 'signs' that are produced as negative. Moreover, through this NDiaye reveals that this marking is associated with their appearance, as young Souhar could not be accused in the same way as Nadia of being responsible for the stigmatisation she faces.[37]

Another way in which NDiaye reinforces the idea that those who are seen as ethnic minorities in France are marked as strangers in the nation is through the attitudes of those implicitly depicted as ethnic majority characters like Ange. Nadia's second husband grew up in the centre of Bordeaux and describes himself as a 'vrai Bordelais' whilst condescendingly implying that Nadia's origins mean she can never make the same claim.[38] In a similar vein, there is a strong emphasis placed upon the idea of authentic or real French food. After Ange is attacked, a neighbour whom Nadia and Ange view with contempt imposes his unwelcome hospitality upon the couple, as Shirley Jordan has demonstrated, and feeds Nadia with gelatinous foods that appear to impregnate her with a monstrous creature.[39] When serving these dishes, Noget proudly states their provenance in French regions, such as Bayonne, Auvergne and Landes. For Brendlé,

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[31] Dominique Rabaté, 'Marie NDiaye et l'art des dérapages contrôlés', in *Une femme puissante : l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye,* ed. by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2013), p.77.
[32] NDiaye (2007), pp.222, 338.
[33] See ibid. pp.251, 338, 41, 43.
[34] See Jordan (2017), p.93; Michael Sheringham, '*Mon cœur à l'étroit* : espace et éthique', in *Marie NDiaye : l'étrangeté à l'œuvre* ed. by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2009), p.174.
[35] See Victoria Baena, 'My Heart Hemmed In by Marie NDiaye', *Book Forum,* (2017) <https://www.bookforum.com/culture/-18572> [accessed 12/04/2021].
[36] NDiaye (2007), p.302.
[37] Multiple characters blame Nadia for the discrimination she faces, including Ange, their neighbour Noget, and her son Ralph. See, for example, ibid. p.321.
[38] Ibid. p.224.
[39] This pregnancy is considered further in the following section. Jordan (2017), p.66.

this emphasis on cuisine 'de terroir' is implicitly connected to the ideas of authentic Bordelais and French identity.[40] Likewise, in their analysis of postcolonial myth-making in modern France, Étienne Achille and Lydie Moudileno argue that an obsessive nostalgia surrounding rural France reveals that it has become a 'lieu privilégié d'expression du patrimoine français et ses symboles, ses valeurs et son art de vivre'.[41] The idea of regional authenticity, like Ange's notion of a 'vrai Bordelais', is not only an allegory for French identity but an expression of it as well.[42] Yet, by placing the phrase 'vrai Bordelais' in quotation marks, Nadia highlights how such regional or national identities are socially constructed rather than natural categories.

Marie NDiaye reveals how this production of an interwoven regional and national identity and culture functions in an exclusionary way. Nadia notes that Ange is 'ataviquement épris de distinctions entre les véritables Bordelais et les autres'.[43] Accordingly, he believes there is a difference between him and ethnic minorities like Nadia, her ex-husband and Corinna, who all grew up in Aubiers which has a large immigrant population, that 'serait de celles qui séparent irrémédiablement deux espèces vivantes'.[44] Sara Ahmed argues that marking serves to differentiate the unmarked self from the other by aligning both with particular kinds of bodies. She thus proposes a metonymy of alignment whereby individual identity becomes linked to collective identity through the process of aligning oneself *with* some people and *against* some others.[45] In this case, Ange aligns himself with a group which he assumes inhabits the ideal of Bordelais and, by extension, French identity, and which is delineated through fetishising some people as strangers. In particular, by aligning himself against those with ethnic minority origins he constructs an exclusionary understanding of Bordelais identity. Meanwhile, whilst imposing his French cuisine on Nadia, Noget forces her to remember her ethnic origins and encourages her to leave the country. Through the connection between Noget's French food, Nadia's recovery of her memories and her exile, NDiaye highlights how Nadia's production and exclusion as an ethnic minority woman is linked to the construction of an ethnicised French identity. Similarly, Noget's greater concern for Ange's welfare than Nadia's underlines how his attitude and behaviour are shaped by his alignment with Ange through a shared ethnocentric understanding of French identity, and against Nadia and other ethnic minorities.

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[40] Brendlé, (2017) p.301.
[41] Etienne Achille and Lydie Moudileno, *Mythologies postcoloniales : pour une décolonisation du quotidien*, (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2018), p.38.
[42] NDiaye (2007), p.224.
[43] Ibid.
[44] See Cornelia Ruhe, 'Le corps de la ville : l'espace urbain chez Marie NDiaye', in *Scénarios d'espace : littérature, cinéma et parcours urbains,* ed. by Jörg Dünne and Wolfram Nitsch (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaises Pascal, 2013), p.240; NDiaye (2007), p.224.
[45] Ahmed (2000), p.49. My emphasis.

However, before exploring the significance of Ange and Noget's ideas further, it is worth examining Flavia Bujor's conclusions about Marie NDiaye's depiction of marking. She argues that the marking process is more complex than racism and should instead be compared to a form of contagious anathema. As Ange, in spite of his ethnic majority origins, is violently stabbed and marginalised in French society, Bujor states that he is also marked and that the mark therefore takes on 'une dimension morale' as 'l'anathème marque les corps dans *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, non pas d'une beauté singulière, mais de stigmates qui signalent une communauté de l'exclusion'.[46] The desire of Nadia's employer and the pharmacist to distance her from the school and the pharmacy respectively could also be read as arising from a fear of this marking contagion. Nevertheless, the way the stranger assaults Nadia and imposes a 'marque du pluriel' upon her simply because of her appearance but not on Ange contradicts this argument. The stranger's lack of aggression or contempt towards Ange can be linked to Nadia's realisation that, throughout the encounter, Ange had decided to 'se tenir à l'écart'.[47] Ignorant of their connection, the stranger is not hostile to Ange but implicitly aligns himself with this white male character through his marking of Nadia. The distance that NDiaye creates between husband and wife thus clarifies the marking process and suggests that, whilst potentially punished for being associated with Nadia, Ange is not marked like her and others because of his origins.[48] The same can be said of the distance that the head teacher and pharmacist wish to create from Nadia: rather than fearing they or their institutions will become contagiously marked through their connection to Nadia, it is more likely these women fear that Nadia's presence will anger pupils, parents or customers.

Through *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, Marie NDiaye therefore highlights how, because of their different cultural origins or upbringing, some people are marked as different in France. By fetishising Nadia as a stranger, ethnic majority characters simultaneously erase her individuality and produce her as a graspable and knowable figure by assigning her to a homogenised group. The way this reduces her to her ethnicity is incompatible with the ideal of universalist abstraction and resembles discourses through which, in the past, minorities were denied equality because they allegedly embodied a difference unsusceptible to abstraction. Yet, by portraying it as widespread in French society and its institutions, she suggests that this is the norm rather than an exception to the rule. NDiaye's exploration of how periphrastic phrases like 'les gens comme vous' are used also indicates how racism occurs, in Nadia's words, 'quand bien même elle n'a pas de nom', and reveals that the rejection of terms such as 'race' or 'ethnicity' in France to respect

[46] Bujor, (2018) p.37.
[47] NDiaye (2007), p.16.
[48] See ibid. p.267.

republican universalism does not prevent essentialist categorisations.[49] In fact, as this paradoxical concealment means Nadia struggles to understand and therefore resist the racism she faces, NDiaye exposes how language superficially compatible with universalist abstraction can protect and perpetuate ethnocentric and exclusionary discourses and practices.

Nonetheless, the way Nadia is fetishised as a stranger due to her appearance alone creates an implicit link between her phenotypical features and her ethnic origins. Similarly, Ange's atavistic conception of himself as a 'vrai Bordelais' suggests that his exclusion of ethnic minorities from this category is 'hereditary': passed on from one generation to the next regardless of cultural upbringing.[50] This has, according to Alec Hargreaves, become common in France as 'exclusionary reflexes among the French themselves have been tending to create in all but name racially constructed ethnic minorities'.[51] Similarly, Christine Delphy states that the phenotypes of postcolonial ethnic minorities and women continue to be transformed into a 'marqueur' or 'signe de repérage' in France that is 'censé être la marque de leur altérité irréductible'.[52] Guillaumin sheds light on this process through her analysis of the evolution of the marking process: she posits that pre-Enlightenment marking, through clothing for example, was understood as a construction reflecting every individual's place in society.[53] In contrast, Enlightenment classification practices have led to constructed marks, such as blackness and femaleness, being naturalised and interpreted as justifying rather than reflecting social relations.[54] NDiaye's depiction of links between marking and phenotypical features demonstrates how a process of racialisation is taking place in France; stranger fetishism serves, as Ahmed suggests, as a 'mechanism for the demarcation of the [French] national body as white'.[55] Regardless of nationality or cultural upbringing, postcolonial ethnic minorities are produced as perpetual strangers embodying an unsurpassable difference and who can hence never be authentically French. Yet, the very fact that this marking means the ethnic majority appears unmarked makes it possible to deny this racialisation of national identity. This results in the kind of neo-racial nationalism Clarisse Behar identifies in *En famille* as it constitutes 'un nationalisme qui soit, sans sembler l'être fondé sur une race sans race, et sur une blancheur sans blancheur'.[56] Taboos around the idea of whiteness and

[49] Ibid. p.334.
[50] Ibid. p.223.
[51] Hargreaves (2007), p.35.
[52] Christine Delphy, 'De la « discrimination positive » et de l'universalisme à la française : à propos de la parité hommes-femmes', in *Un universalisme si particulier: féminisme et exception française (1980-2010),* ed. by Christine Delphy (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 1996 (2010)), pp.201, 312.
[53] Guillaumin (1995), p.140.
[54] Ibid. p.144.
[55] Ahmed (2000), p.101. I first apply the concept of stranger fetishism to analyse this novel in Marmont (2019).
[56] Behar (2013), p.127.

race that Behar argues exist in NDiaye's earlier novel appear in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* as well and allow the ethnic majority to portray universalist ideals as being upheld in spite of the exclusionary racism shaping nationalist discourses and Nadia's experiences.

Marie NDiaye also signals the complex nature of the marking process as the emotions or atmosphere it creates fluctuate. The novel begins with Nadia's realisation that she is suddenly the subject of great hostility and is one of 'ceux qu'on ne supporte plus de voir dans la ville'.[57] NDiaye portrays this as a mood which descends upon Bordeaux's inhabitants like the mysterious and never-ending fog which simultaneously envelops the city itself. Even those, like the pharmacist, who profess to disagree with Nadia's treatment, feel vulnerable to the pervasive 'influence de l'atmosphère'.[58] This sudden transformation might suggest that this attitude towards Nadia, along with the marking involved, is an entirely new threat originating beyond the borders of the city or nation. However, another transformation that occurs before the narrative's timeline sheds light on this issue. As noted earlier, by using italics NDiaye highlights how Nadia's memories of her childhood and her origins have been repressed. This kind of 'blanking' is a common theme in Marie NDiaye's *œuvre* which often arises from, as Andrew Asibong has demonstrated, traumatic childhood experiences, particularly the lack of emotional presence of the parents in the child's life.[59] Yet being reminded of the smell of her mother's cooking brings back happy memories for Nadia: '*Avec quelle hâte, quel bonheur, quelle joyeuse tranquillité de ma conscience ces effluves-là me faisaient monter l'escalier quand, enfant, je rentrais de l'école pour déjeuner, et comme je les ai fuis après*'.[60] This description conveys not only Nadia's love for her mother's cooking but also that it symbolises a joyful childhood and a positive relationship with her family. This is reinforced by Nadia's description of growing up 'dans la gentillesse, dans la bienveillance' and when, reunited with her parents in C., she finds her mother's food wholesome and comforting, just like her parents' company.[61] Indeed, she even believes that this food has a magical quality that expels an abject creature with which she became pregnant in France, which will be discussed further in the next section. However, as her phrase '*je les ai fuis après*' suggests, something changes which leads to Nadia fleeing and feeling ashamed of her family, to the extent that she actively tries to disguise any signs of her origins, including by lying to Ange that her parents are dead.[62]

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[57] NDiaye (2007), p.215.
[58] Ibid. p.34.
[59] See Andrew Asibong, 'Autour de la mère morte', in *Une femme puissante : l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye,* ed. by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013); Asibong (2013).
[60] NDiaye (2007), p.341. Original emphasis.
[61] Ibid. p.202.
[62] Ibid. p.251. Original emphasis.

In light of Nadia's happy memories, her transformation and the traumatism it signals is unlikely to be caused by her family. Instead, her rejection of her mother's wholesome cooking and all this represents can be linked to the fatty French food which replaces it. Just as Nadia has supposedly authentic French food imposed upon her, she metaphorically ingests the accompanying discourses that produce an ethnocentric vision of Frenchness that fetishises her and others with ethnic minority origins as strangers. In other words, as Shirley Jordan notes, she has internalised the racism in French society.[63] On the one hand, NDiaye reveals that the marking process is socially constructed rather than natural as Nadia's negative attitude towards her origins is learned rather than automatic. On the other hand, she illuminates how Nadia rejects her own family and origins, and unconsciously represses how she is affected by the same marking process, in the hope of finding the sense of belonging that she is denied in the nation. This internalisation and the subsequent metamorphosis which Nadia undergoes in her childhood thus reveal that the exclusion and hostility she faces later are influenced by a pre-existing process of racialisation. In this vein, NDiaye's references to Nadia's childhood elucidate how stranger fetishism can sow the seeds of the virulent xenophobia and exclusionary violence that Nadia faces later on. Accordingly, the origins of the transformation in Bordeaux or France's 'atmosphere' at the beginning of the novel are not external but internal. NDiaye's depiction of stranger fetishism in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* therefore undermines the common French narrative examined in the introduction that racism and communitarianism are fundamentally foreign to republican universalism as they are an import from other societies and ideologies, particularly Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism.

NDiaye also stresses the implications of the marking process, and the way it differs from the temporary marginalisation that ethnic majority characters like Ange face. At the end of the novel, Nadia's metaphorical wounds initially seem to have healed like Ange's as she is reunited with her parents and granddaughter. However, the disparity in their situations is evident as Nadia discovers that Ange, since her flight, has not been the victim of the same social stigma and so has been able to return to work, start a new relationship with Corinna, and lead a normal life in Bordeaux. Meanwhile Nadia has been unable to salvage her relationship with her son or find work as a teacher because she cannot (admit that she can) speak the local language. Further, the fact that she is warned to leave France and Corinna replaces her at the school and in Ange's life highlights that there is no place for Nadia in the city and country she calls home, the school where she taught or her own marriage.

Although Ange's wound may have scarred over, Nadia remains marked by her ethnic origins and experiences the negative implications of this in her daily life. She is denied the

[63] Jordan (2017), p.93. This issue is explored further in the next section.

redemption that is afforded to Ange as a white man with a 'vrai bordelais' status enabling him to return to a privileged lifestyle having almost forgotten about his wound.[64] Bujor's suggestion that the marking depicted in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* is a form of contagious anathema therefore overlooks how the cultural production of Nadia as an ethnic minority woman in France has a serious and enduring negative impact on her life by levelling it with Ange's temporary experience of marginalisation because of his actions. Moreover, Nadia's experiences have no positive impact on the marking process in France or the lives of others who are minoritised there. Indeed, it is in a passage where Nadia appears to predict Ange and Corinna's future relationship that she reflects on how, whilst he might be attracted to Corinna, he would always remember her origins as though they were from two different 'espèces'.[65] In this vein, NDiaye conveys how Nadia's suffering as an ethnic minority woman and Ange's awareness of this do not alter the nation's failure to enact its own universalist ideals through the atavistic exclusion of a part of France's population.

The Transformation of Fantasies into Figures in Linda Lê's 'L'Encrier'

'L'Encrier' recounts the events of one evening which begins with the narrator desperately trying to write a history-changing speech for the *Chef* of an extreme-right party and culminates in him killing his employer. This is related to his memories, triggered during the writing process, of his friendship with Lynx and love for *l'étrangère* whilst at school and of his complicity in the abduction and brutal torture and murder of the latter. His reflections reveal that he has not always aligned himself with the extreme or even centre-Right for, as a teenager, he was relatively uninterested in politics but would support Lynx's Left-wing anarchism, even if only to gain a sense of belonging.[66] Although he later goes on to write speeches inciting xenophobia, he initially welcomes and soon falls in love with a foreign girl whom he names '*l'étrangère*' when she joins their school.

Beyond explaining that she comes from a distant country, the narrator's only description of *l'étrangère* is that 'Elle apportait avec elle la chaleur et un air de gravité qui s'éclairait, au moment où l'on s'y attendait le moins, d'un sourire radieux'.[67] This statement and his initial attitude towards her can be understood in light of Ahmed's conception of marking and stranger fetishism as being based on the assumption that there is a difference that 'can be found

[64] See NDiaye (2007), p.377.
[65] Ibid. p.224.
[66] Lê (2002), p.20.
[67] Ibid.

somewhere on (or in) the bodies of strangers'.[68] Firstly, the way in which he labels her *l'étrangère*, even after she has lived in France for many years, conveys not only how he associates her with a foreign ethnic difference but also how he conceives it as immutable. This implies that he essentialises her identity as unchanged by her interaction with other people and cultures that differ from those of her childhood and so reveals how he perpetually reduces her to those foreign origins. This phenomenon is common across Lê's oeuvre as many of her characters are unable to surpass their origins, or those of their parents, in the eyes of the ethnic majority. In *Lettre morte* (1999), for example, the female Vietnamese narrator states that her white French lover has imposed his 'marque' on her and explains that, in his eyes, 'je restais l'étrangère'.[69] Like NDiaye, Lê thus explicitly refers to the concept of marking in order to understand how ethnic minorities are permanently fetishised as strangers in France. By having the *Chef* nickname the narrator of 'L'Encrier' 'franco', which shares the same linguistic stem as France, she also highlights how this attitude makes it possible for the narrator to associate himself with a particular and exclusionary image of the French nation and French identity.[70] The fact that this constructs an ethnocentric vision of Frenchness is particularly clear in the speeches the narrator writes for the *Chef*, which will be considered later in my analysis of barbarism and abjection.

The narrator's labelling of *l'étrangère* and omission of any real details about her character, experiences or homeland demonstrate how this essentialisation also levels her with other foreign women. This is underlined when he states that Lynx no longer belongs in his hometown because he left for Paris with 'une étrangère', as though, firstly, she were any foreign woman and, secondly, Lynx becomes a foreigner to the region through his association with her. By marking her, the narrator thus denies *l'étrangère* any individuality and excludes her from the same kind of ethnocentric understanding of regional and national identity depicted in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*.

In spite of its brevity, a comparison of the narrator's description of *l'étrangère* with Mai Lam Nguyen-Conan's reflections on the 'regard de l'autre' can elucidate the particular nature of the difference with which he marks her and other foreign women.[71] In her autobiography, Nguyen-Conan considers how she is viewed in French society as an Indochinese refugee who fled communism in the former French protectorate of Laos. Whilst her experiences bear various similarities to those of Linda Lê, of interest here is her exploration of the relationship between the

[68] Ahmed (2000), p.126.
[69] See Lê (1999), pp.60, 76.
[70] Lê (2002), p.17.
[71] Mai Lam Nguyen-Conan, *Français je vous ai tant aimés : l'impossible intégration?*, (Paris: Éditions Michalon, 2012), pp.88-89.

gaze of others, commodification of her foeign origins, and acceptance in French society, because they can shed light on Lê's depictions of these themes not only in 'L'Encrier' but throughout her oeuvre: 'Mais je crois que le regard de l'autre sur moi […] repose néanmoins sur un fantasme. "On" aurait accepté certains aspects de la culture vietnamienne en moi, mais des aspects plutôt valorisants pour la personne qui les recherchait, ou à la rigueur exotiques'.[72] Nguyen-Conan's statement reveals that the image the ethnic majority have of this ethnic minority woman is based upon reductive and exotic stereotypes which deny her individuality. Similarly, the narrator's statement that *l'étrangère* 'apportait avec elle la chaleur' associates her with the supposed heat or warmth of her homeland and highlights his vision of both its exotic nature and the fact that it resides within *l'étrangère*.[73] Further, he portrays her smile merely as an extension of this embodiment as if it, like the warmth of her country of birth, radiated from her body.[74] By seeing *l'étrangère* as the embodiment of stereotyped geographical and cultural origins, the narrator therefore produces her, as Ahmed suggests is the case in stranger fetishism, as a 'figure of difference' who embodies his own fantasies about difference, whether positive or negative.[75] In other words, his gaze upon her, as Nguyen-Conan suggests from her own experience, reveals more about his fantasies than her identity and origins.[76] In this case, his depiction of her smile and how he falls in love with her highlights that his cultural production of her is based on his fantasies about a difference that is both exotic and, simultaneously, feminised and sexualised.

The way in which this means the narrator constructs *l'étrangère* to meet his own ideals is explored further by Lê in other works, including *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien* (2020). Here, the Vietnamese lover and then wife of a French lawyer, who secures her naturalisation in France, is conceived as embodying an almost angelic, selfless and submissive difference. Yet, by encouraging her to 'correspondre à un certain idéal qu'il s'était forgé', he detracts attention from his own failure to meet these ideals and the republican universalist principles he espouses by, firstly, leading a double life with a second family and, secondly, reducing her to this difference.[77] Instead, he places a burden upon her shoulders that he does not impose on himself through the creation of this gendered and ethnicised fantasy. Similarly, the narrator's attitude in 'L'Encrier' creates an exotic image of difference and, consequently, the expectation that *l'étrangère* should meet this.

[72] Ibid. p.89; Lê (2002), p.22.
[73] Lê (2002), p.20.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ahmed (2000), p.5.
[76] Nguyen-Conan (2012), p.88.
[77] Lê (2020), p.17.

Although this kind of marking of women and ethnic minorities in French society has been identified as an issue by French scholars and activists, this process is often denied within the Hexagon. For example, the politician Djordje Kuzmanovic, formerly part of the radical left party *La France insoumise* and founder of the party *République souveraine* in 2019, argues that republican universalism means that people are not essentialised in France: 'depuis les Lumières, la spécificité et l'orgueil de la France a toujours été ne pas mettre les gens dans des cases, de ne pas les assigner à une identité limitante en fonction de leur religion, de leur genre ou de leur orientation sexuelle'.[78] Lê's depictions of *l'étrangère* challenge such ahistorical claims by revealing how these characters are marked with a particular gender and ethnicity even though terms such as race, or even specific ethnicities, are never used. Her portrayal of how the narrator reductively marks *l'étrangère* even before his engagement with far-right political discourses also exposes how such essentialising discourses are at work across the political spectrum. Furthermore, by exploring how a left-wing lawyer promoting republican universalism is equally guilty of marking in *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien*, Lê underlines how republican universalist discourses can in fact conceal and consequently facilitate this essentialisation.

Kuzmanovic locates his statement within the argument that minorities mobilising to tackle inequalities in France, for example the 'indigénistes [qui] remettent sur le devant de la scène le concept de race', engage in communitarianism and differentialism incompatible with universalist abstraction.[79] In contrast, Lê's text, like *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, exposes how social marks are imposed by the ethnic majority, regardless of how *l'étrangère* conceives her own identity. As this marking process allows the narrator and other characters like Lynx and the *Chef* to appear unmarked, this suggests that these men produce themselves as universal whilst *l'étrangère* and other minoritised characters are relegated to the particular. Ultimately, the process depicted here is consistent with historic discourses in which women or slaves were deemed unsusceptible to abstraction and, by extension, particular rather than universal.[80] The cultural construction of *l'étrangère* is therefore incompatible with the ideals of universalism and reveals how the republican promise of abstraction is denied through the masquerading of a form of particularism as universalism.

Lê also explores how the narrator produces *l'étrangère* and her difference as something advantageous, or 'valorisant', for him: 'je m'enivrais de l'espoir de devenir enfin quelqu'un grâce à

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[78] Djordje Kuzmanovic, 'Cessons de caricaturer l'universalisme républicain', *Marianne,* (2019) <https://www.marianne.net/debattons/tribunes/cessons-de-caricaturer-l-universalisme-republicain> [accessed 14/08/2019].
[79] Ibid.
[80] For greater detail see the 'Unveiling the Violence of Republican Universalist Discourses' in the Introduction and Scott (2005).

elle, à travers elle'.[81] His fantasies about *l'étrangère* and her exotic and sexualised difference become fantasies about using or incorporating this difference in order to transform himself, to compensate for what he lacks. On the one hand, as Ahmed argues that the act of welcoming or incorporating the stranger's difference erodes the agency of those who are fetishised, the narrator's focus upon appropriating *l'étrangère*'s difference in his own journey of becoming reinforces his own agency through the erosion of *l'étrangère*'s.[82] On the other hand, it can be related to Nguyen-Conan's statement that, '[p]our être acceptée par les accueillants, ma culture d'origine devait être une promesse de quelque chose, une monnaie d'échange'.[83] The notion of incorporating *l'étrangère*'s alleged difference therefore not only dehumanises but also commodifies this woman because of her gender and origins.

Whilst the enactment of a transformative commodification is prevented by *l'étrangère*'s relationship with Lynx, Lê explores its potential implications elsewhere. The daughter in *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien* notes that, from his relationship with a Vietnamese refugee and his work as a lawyer helping her and other refugees, her father 'en tirait un grand profit personnel'.[84] Specifically, he transforms himself into a gallant 'chevalier' who protects the vulnerable and serves as one of the 'défenseurs des valeurs universelles', an image which he exploits to launch his political career later on in life.[85] Lê also implicitly links this behaviour to French colonialism by describing his clients as *'les damnés de la terre*'.[86] Through this reference to Frantz Fanon's seminal text, she underlines how the lawyer's saviour narrative and use of universalist discourses can be seen as a legacy of colonialism because of the way in which they continue to dehumanise postcolonial immigrants. The novelist thus highlights the potentially exploitative as well as exclusionary nature of discourses and practices which appear to value the difference with which minorities are marked.

The narrator's commodification of *l'étrangère* is also evident in his statement that 'mon seul ami m'avait volé l'étrangère'.[87] This reveals a sense of male entitlement to the objectified female body as his friend is depicted as stealing and, therefore, possessing *l'étrangère* in the way he desires. This is a common theme in Linda Lê's novels as many women, regardless of ethnicity, are treated as sexualised commodities by men or as objects that they can mould to fit their own

[81] Nguyen-Conan (2012), p.89; Lê (2002), p.22.
[82] For more detail on this process see Ahmed's analysis of *Dancing with Wolves* in Ahmed (2000), pp.121-24.
[83] Nguyen-Conan (2012), p.89.
[84] Lê (2020), p.44.
[85] Ibid. pp.100-01.
[86] Ibid. p.45; See Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, (Kindle ebook: A verba futuroruM, 2016).
[87] Lê (2002), p.22.

fantasies.[88] The former is manifested in the behaviour of Morgue, the selfish and abusive white lover of the narrator in *Lettre morte*, who is described as taking possession of her body.[89] Similarly, the Pygmalion-like editor in *Calomnies* decides to transform his plain secretary into the living image of a woman in an advert in his office and thereby 'imprimer sur sa peau la marque de fabrication'.[90] In a similar vein, my second chapter demonstrates how the editor attempts to mould the ethnic minority female narrator's writing in relation to the way he marks her with intersecting gender and ethnic difference. In other words, the marking of these women as figures of gender and sometimes ethnic difference is accompanied by a commodification that reveals the subordinate and dehumanising position given to them in these relationships and, in light of the prevalence of these attitudes, in French society.

Ultimately, this commodification also manifests itself in the abduction of *l'étrangère*. As the narrator depicts it as a means to attack Lynx and his left-wing party, rather than revealing that it is to satiate a personal vendetta, the extremists involved are motivated not just by xenophobia but by the racist and sexist assumption that *l'étrangère* can be employed as a pawn to challenge Lynx and his party's toleration of ethnic minorities. As such, Lê reveals how the dehumanising commodification of ethnic minority women can also be involved in the forms of extreme gender-based violence that *l'étrangère* faces as she is sequestered, tortured and stabbed to death.

'L'Encrier' conveys Lê's concern that there has been a 'résurgence d'un nationalisme exacerbé en Europe' fomenting this kind of intolerance over the last couple of decades in France. In a 2010 interview, she explains the imminent danger posed by such attitudes: 'Peut-être que nous sommes dans une époque de paix apparente, mais il y a des conflits sous-jacents près d'exploser, et je vis dans la crainte d'une conflagration'.[91] Similarly, although the extreme xenophobic and gender-based violence against *l'étrangère* differs from the narrator's infatuation with her as a teenager, Lê highlights the link between the two. For it is when the narrator is unable to commodify *l'étrangère* to boost his sense of self-worth that he turns to the enigmatic *Chef* and the extreme-right politics of his party to gain a similar sense of self-esteem and power at the expense of ethnic minority women in particular. Lê portrays marking, even when it seems relatively harmless, tolerant or enveloped in republican universalism, as reinforcing an exclusionary image of the French nation. In turn, it is this marking which sows divisions and is

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[88] For an analysis of how the male characters attempt to mould ethnic minority women, see Chapter Two.
[89] Lê (1999), p.60.
[90] Lê (1993), p.124. The second chapter will explore further how Linda Lê employs the Pygmalion myth to explore the exploitation of ethnic minority women.
[91] Marine Landrot, 'J'aime que les livres soient des brasiers', *Télérama,* (2010) <https://www.telerama.fr/livre/linda-le-j-aime-que-les-livres-soient-des-brasiers,59204.php> [accessed 19/05/2020].

therefore the pre-condition for 'des conflits sous-jacents' which can erupt into virulent xenophobia and gender-based violence.[92] Through her portrayal of the narrator's evolving attitude and behaviour towards *l'étrangère*, Lê, like NDiaye in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, sheds light on the context and processes leading to more conspicuous forms of racism and sexism. It is only an awareness of marking as their pre-condition, and how this is a legacy of French imperialism, which makes it possible to comprehend how the narrator can wish to, in relation to his former friend and love interest, 'les exterminer, eux et leurs semblables'.[93] It is with this in mind that the next section examines the discourses and practices at work in the most violent manifestations of marking and stranger fetishism.

Marking the Borders of the Nation and the Abject

Building upon the analysis of marking and stranger fetishism in the novels, this section explores how it can involve the production of the ethnic minority female characters as 'objects of abjection'. This elucidates the most violent and xenophobic facet of stranger fetishism as the intersectional construction of ethnic minority women as a threat to the nation justifies their exclusion and violence against them. It also demonstrates how this violence is the visible manifestation of the symbolic process that constructs an ethnocentric vision of the French nation as superior through portraying other cultures as inferior, or civilised and barbarous respectively in 'L'Encrier'. In turn, it reveals how the authors challenge this process by undermining self/other or civilised/barbarous dichotomies and exposing the intersectional social hierarchy they reinforce in French society.

Expelling the Abject and Reproducing Intersectional Hierarchies in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*

The stranger fetishism that Nadia faces in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* involves, according to Ahmed, the production of symbolic borders between the self and the stranger and is both a manifestation of and means of reproducing unequal hierarchies.[94] Similarly, Guillaumin reveals how the marking of black people as inferior during the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the effect rather than the source of this 'appropriation and domination of human beings' and was mobilised to justify their ongoing enslavement.[95] Ahmed also exposes how these symbolic borders and asymmetrical power relations are reinforced through the idea that the stranger can be incorporated into or expelled from the nation. Indeed, this is so central to stranger fetishism that she states that 'the figure of

[92] Ibid.
[93] Lê (2002), p.22.
[94] Ahmed (2000), pp.52, 124.
[95] Guillaumin (1995), p.151.

the stranger is an effect of the processes that imagine 'it' can either be taken in, welcomed or expelled in the first place'.[96] This section uses Nadia's encounter with the stranger as a fulcrum to examine how the (re)formation of social borders, particularly through Nadia's symbolic and literal expulsion, upholds an inegalitarian social hierarchy. I employ Kristeva's concept of abjection to demonstrate how Nadia is not only produced as inferior but also, when she fails to meet the intersecting racist and sexist expectations placed upon her, as a threatening figure of difference requiring expulsion.[97] This analysis reveals, firstly, how such encounters produce and reproduce the borders of the ideal French body and, secondly, how Marie NDiaye subverts this very process and the related concept of discrete identities and spaces.

During their encounter, Nadia notices that the stranger seems to experience three distinct emotions during their confrontation: disgust, fear and anger. The first is made evident as he labels her as 'saleté' and spits on her, while his fear and anger can be read on his body as Nadia can see 'une appréhension' in his eyes and describes his lips as 'bleues de froid et de colère'.[98] The stranger's description of Nadia as 'filth' and use of 'tu' to address an older lady whom he does not know reveals that the stranger not only fetishises her as a stranger but sees her as inferior as a result. As Frantz Fanon has established, the term 'saleté' was often used against black people from French colonies in phrases such as 'Sale nègre!' and signified not merely a physical but more especially a moral filthiness.[99] In particular, terms such as 'saleté' became imbricated in a dichotomy justifying colonialism by depicting blackness as physically, morally and culturally inferior to whiteness.[100] Through her inclusion of a term with such imperialist overtones, NDiaye highlights the racist social hierarchy within which Nadia is trapped in modern-day France and how this is a legacy of the nation's colonial and slave-trading history.

NDiaye further emphasises this connection by setting the novel in Bordeaux, as this was one of the main slave-trading ports in France. Additionally, Cornelia Ruhe compares Nadia's journey as she flees the country from Bordeaux, to Toulon and then to C., to the triangular movement of the Atlantic slave trade. She argues that, just as many Africans lost their lives and independence in the past, Nadia's journey symbolises her social death in French society.[101] The idea that Nadia's experiences of racism and discrimination in France can, in some ways, be traced back to the nation's past is also hinted at through Ange's belief that he and Nadia or Corinna are

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[96] Ahmed (2000), p.141.
[97] See Kristeva (1980).
[98] NDiaye (2007), p.15.
[99] See Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), pp.88, 152.
[100] Shehla Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial theory, and strategies for Critique* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2012), p.51.
[101] Ruhe (2013), p.251.

from two entirely separate 'espèces'.[102] This phraseology is reminiscent of, firstly, nineteenth century polygenist theories that there were distinct human species descended from different ancestors and, secondly, discourses that dehumanise and inferiorise people by associating them with animals.[103] Both discourses contributed to the dichotomy outlined by Fanon and were often employed to justify European colonialism as well as the slave trade. By creating such links in her work, NDiaye conveys how, in spite of the universalist rejection of the concept of race, racism and stranger fetishism are a legacy of imperialism that continues to sow division and create inequality in French society.

The term 'filth' also suggests that the stranger believes Nadia poses a threat to him, as something which might contaminate him. Yet, as demonstrated by Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 'emotions are not simply "in" the subject or the object because emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by an object'.[104] The question raised by the stranger's disgust, fear and anger is therefore not why Nadia is intrinsically disgusting or threatening but, instead, what is achieved by producing her in this way. Indeed, NDiaye stresses the socially constructed nature of this image of Nadia through her somewhat parodic portrayal of a young man towering over a small, middle-aged woman and yet apparently frightened and threatened by her. To understand similar racist responses, Ahmed engages with the notion of abjection which Kristeva conceptualises as 'une de ces violentes et obscures révoltes de l'être contre ce qui le menace et qui lui paraît venir d'un dehors ou d'un dedans exorbitant, jeté à côté du possible, du tolérable, du pensable'.[105] As such, the object of abjection is not inherently unpleasant but deemed so because it is produced as a threat to the self. The stranger's production of Nadia as disgusting and potentially contaminating thus reveals that he is also constructing her as a dangerous object of abjection.

Significantly, it is not merely Nadia's ethnicity that is identified as threatening as it seems to be the fact that she smiles at him that he finds so intolerable. Smiling is often a subject of feminist scholarship because of the way women are compelled to smile to please others in society, leading Ahmed to describe it as a form of emotional labour.[106] However, she also notes that in some cases, particularly for ethnic minority women, smiling is interpreted as overly

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[102] NDiaye (2007), p.224.
[103] See Bronwen Douglas, 'Climate to Crania: science and the racialization of human difference', in *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race 1750-1940,* ed. by Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008).
[104] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.6.
[105] Kristeva (1980), p.9.
[106] See Ahmed (2017), p.58.

assertive.[107] Similarly, the stranger interprets an act which normally brings people together as too assertive and as forcing proximity between them. Marking Nadia as an ethnic minority woman in a context of increasing national xenophobia therefore creates the idea that she can be treated differently to others, including white women who are not ostracised in the same way in the novel.[108] The power relations involved in this process can be linked to Ahmed's argument that the way men like the stranger mark women like Nadia, and therefore appear unmarked themselves, is evidence of their privilege in society. [109] Likewise, the stranger is marked by privilege that allows him to not only appear unmarked and universal but reinforce the exclusionary and unequal social system that sustains his privilege.

The reason why Nadia's smile is conceived as threatening by the stranger can be explained with reference to Kristeva's argument that it is not a lack of cleanliness that leads to abjection but something that blurs the borders between a supposedly opposed self and other. The abject is, therefore, 'ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre, ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles'.[110] In this vein, Nadia's smile is seen by the stranger as an act that violates the social order and so destabilises the symbolic border he has constructed between them by fetishising her. His fear and disgust is linked to the challenge he believes her behaviour poses to his privilege as white and male and, therefore, to his way of life: 'fear works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*. […] Such fantasies of the other hence work to justify violence against others, whose very existence comes to be felt as a threat to the life of the white body'.[111] As an ethnic minority woman marked as out of place in France, by acting as though she were in place, Nadia is judged not only to be challenging the right of others to be in place but also to be taking their place. In other words, her smile is interpreted as her refusal of the way she is marked as inferior and the related unuttered rules of conduct she is supposed to follow at that time and in that particular context. Similarly, the way Ange is punished for his association with Nadia but not Corinna suggests that this is because he is seen as being complicit in Nadia's rejection of her marks.[112] As a result of this apparent refusal of her marking in French society, and the inferior social position associated with it, other characters transform this ethnic minority woman into an object of abjection.

By the end of their confrontation, the stranger's emotions have come full circle as the way he spits on Nadia and walks away conveys his continued sense of disgust: 'Il penche la tête en

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[107] Ibid.
[108] This point builds upon my analysis of how Nadia is not allowed to smile in Marmont (2019), p.51.
[109] Ahmed (2000), p.46.
[110] Kristeva (1980), p.12.
[111] Ahmed (2004), p.64.
[112] See NDiaye (2007), p.267.

arrière puis la ramène brusquement et crache sur mon front'.[113] Kristeva argues that the abject not only disturbs an identity or system but, as a result of this, must be rejected or expelled from the self. [114] This symbolic expulsion serves as a means to mentally reform the borders of the self, related to individual and collective identity, as though it were whole and apart. The abrupt and visceral way in which the stranger spits on Nadia mimics the sense of expelling the foreign agent that threatens to penetrate or take over the body of the nation from within. Thus, this act symbolically reconstructs the border between the self and the other along with 'a new, separate bodily and social space'.[115] This reasserts the privilege of the white man as in place in France by (re)constructing the ethnic minority woman as different, inferior and out of place.

Marie NDiaye explores this idea of the expulsion of the abject throughout the narrative, including in Nadia's personification of the city as wilfully bewildering and excluding her: 'Soit […] elle se contracte pour nous expulser, soit elle se dilate monstrueusement pour nous perdre, soit, je l'ai vu de mes yeux, elle se transforme pour qu'on ne la reconnaisse pas'.[116] This depiction emphasises the link between Nadia's individual encounter with the stranger and the way in which she is produced as abject and symbolically expelled by the ethnic majority and by extension the city and country as a whole. Nadia's characterisation of the city centre as a 'cœur assassin' highlights, as Sara Bonomo notes, the themes of centre and periphery as Nadia is marginalised.[117] This statement can also be linked to the marking process and Nadia's production as abject. Nadia's repressed memories convey how she gradually and intentionally moved, firstly, from Aubiers in the *banlieues* towards the city through her first marriage and abandonment of her family and, subsequently, into its very heart through her marriage with Ange. Nadia is motivated by the association of this central space with authentic Bordelais and French identity but her fetishisation means that the ethnic majority will always deny her this belonging. Furthermore, Nadia's rejection of the way she is excluded and the marks imposed upon her means that this space, like its inhabitants, attempts to violently expel her from its borders. Through the notion of the city's 'cœur assassin' NDiaye therefore highlights the violence involved in the marking process and the expulsion of the stranger when symbolic borders are supposedly penetrated.

Ange's suppurating wound, inflicted on him as punishment for his association with Nadia, also symbolises this process. Just as Nadia is portrayed as transgressing the imagined boundaries between the white French self and ethnic minority other by rejecting her marking, Ange's pupils

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[113] Ibid. pp.15-16.
[114] Kristeva (1980), p.9.
[115] Ahmed (2000), p.38.
[116] NDiaye (2007), p.216.
[117] Ibid. p.236. Sara Bonomo, 'Chemins différents. Marie NDiaye et Régis Jauffret', in *Papier-villes,* ed. by M. T. Jacquet (Bari: Éditions B. A. Graphis, collection Marges critiques, 2008), p.30.

break through his skin and create a wound which remains open and vulnerable, producing foul smelling pus, as long as Nadia remains in the country. Whilst Ange appears to be on his deathbed when Nadia flees Bordeaux, he later appears in C. having undergone a fantastic recovery so a small scar is all that remains of his wound.[118] As a result, Michael Sheringham proposes that the wound can be seen as a metaphor for the social body of Bordeaux, which rejects Nadia and can only be healed through her expulsion.[119] In light of Kristeva's concept of abjection, we can add that this healing involves the country reproducing symbolic borders which allow it to create an image of the French nation as discrete as well as superior.

Kristeva reveals the falsity of this notion of the separate and whole self because of the subject's fascination with as well as repulsion for the object of abjection. The abject is produced as something which 'sollicite, inquiète, fascine le désir' such that the subject is 'attiré vers un ailleurs aussi tentant que condamné'.[120] Similarly, NDiaye conveys how the stranger is drawn towards Nadia in their encounter as he comes so close that she can feel his breath on her skin. This ambivalent reaction is particularly clear when Nadia catches a glimpse of her boss with a horrified expression on her face when she sees her from a tram: 'Et c'est une expression de surprise horrifiée, d'aversion et de terreur qui dénoue soudain les traits de ce visage […] Mme la directrice me regarde jusqu'à ce que le tram ait tourné au coin de l'avenue, sans effacer de son visage cet air d'épouvante…'.[121] As with the stranger, the *Directrice* appears entranced as well as disgusted by Nadia as she cannot take her eyes off of her. The *Directrice* and the stranger therefore simultaneously desire Nadia's expulsion and feel captivated by her as an object of abjection. Such fascination signals a proximity and interdependency that blurs the supposed boundaries between the self and the other, and so undermines the notion of borders that the symbolic act of expulsion seeks to establish. This can also be seen in Nadia's reaction to her granddaughter's name Souhar: although disgusted by the name's obvious foreignness and fearful it will expose her and her granddaughter as outsiders, it remains on the tip of Nadia's tongue throughout the novel because her self-construction as a bourgeois, French woman is dependent upon this constant contact and then expulsion. By exploring this fascination and inter-dependency, *Mon cœur à l'étroit* reveals the ambivalence present in the construction of the nation and its abject strangers for, as Ahmed notes, 'the nation requires strangers to exist itself'.[122] Nevertheless, whilst challenging the idea of discrete homogenous identities, NDiaye also

[118] NDiaye (2007), p.377.
[119] Sheringham (2009), p.173.
[120] Kristeva (1980), p.9.
[121] NDiaye (2007), p.27.
[122] Ahmed (2000), p.100.

exposes how such discourses have a material impact on characters like Nadia as they are linked to the marginalisation, violence and exclusion she experiences.

NDiaye employs the theme of penetration to simultaneously underline the violence her ethnic minority female protagonist faces and undermine the idea of borders between the self and the other. The way in which the stranger steps in towards Nadia and invades her personal space conveys the power relations involved in this encounter and how they reduce her mobility.[123] Indeed, in contrast to the image created through the expulsion of the abject that Nadia is the one who has infiltrated the nation, NDiaye depicts how it is often Nadia who suffers this as, for example, Noget appears to have impregnated her with his food without Nadia's knowledge. This idea of sexual penetration by the exclusionary French discourses that Noget's food symbolises illustrates how Nadia's experience of racism is also shaped by the way she is gendered. The fact that this penetration enacts unequal power relations is evident in the way that Nadia is only able to watch as her body expands in a process that is, for the meantime, beyond her understanding and control. Likewise, the stranger's invasion of her space in the street leads to her experiencing 'une soudaine envie d'uriner'.[124] In her analysis of *Trois femmes puissantes*, Anne-Martine Parent argues that the way NDiaye's marginalised characters blush, sweat, cry or urinate 'à leur corps défendant' symbolises their loss of control over their identity. Similarly, the power relations involved in marking Nadia make her own identity construction more vulnerable than that of the white, male stranger or Noget. In other words, NDiaye reveals how Nadia's self-construction is threatened as Noget and the stranger's privilege means that they can reinforce their sense of superiority through their production of her as an object of abjection.

NDiaye explores this further through the notion of the penetrative gaze of others as they judge her and then punitively expel her. The production of Nadia as a racialised and gendered object of abjection is therefore a means to protect, police and reassert the socially-constructed borders between the nation and its strangers.[125] The policing and judgement this defensive mechanism involves is central to the hostile and monstrous 'atmosphère' created in Bordeaux and is an issue that NDiaye identifies as present in France around the time that she wrote this novel.[126] Discussing anti-black racism in France and her brother's work *La Condition noire* in an interview in 2009, NDiaye describes France under President Nicolas Sarkozy as 'monstrueuse' and explains

[123] The theme of mobility and its relation to unequal gendered and racialised hierarchies is explored further in Chapter Three.
[124] NDiaye (2007), p.15.
[125] See Kristeva (1980), p.9.
[126] NDiaye (2007), pp.34, 216.

that the family's move to Berlin was partially motivated by this.[127] In particular, she states that it is the 'atmosphère de flicage, de vulgarité' that she finds so intolerable.[128] This statement can be linked to NDiaye's naming of Brice Hortefeux and Éric Besson as contributors to this climate, both of whom took on the new ministerial post for immigration, integration and national identity between 2007 and 2010. Indeed, this post and a focus on migration control rather than integration and inclusion arose from and perpetuated a narrative stigmatising postcolonial immigrants and ethnic minorities, particularly those from Africa, as a potential threat to national security and identity.[129] As republican universalist discourse was employed by Sarkozy and others to justify such narratives, it therefore facilitated the treatment of postcolonial immigrants and minorities as second-class citizens.[130]

NDiaye recreates this 'atmosphère de flicage' through her employment of juridical vocabulary in the novel as Nadia is treated and policed as a second-class citizen. The way the stranger asks Nadia 'du quel droit tu me souris' highlights the asymmetrical power relations involved in their encounter as, regardless of her constitutional rights, she is not allowed to behave in the same way as others.[131] Instead, it is likely that he expects her to behave as her parents have in the past by, firstly, never leaving the confines of Aubiers and, secondly, by 'rasant les murs comme s'ils étaient recherchés pour un crime terrible, se comportant en toute chose en coupables…'.[132] Nadia is expected to know her inferior place in society, physically and symbolically peripheralised in the *banlieues*, and to accept the way she is judged, for, as Nathalie explains, 'Vous n'êtes peut-être pas en position d'exprimer des reproches. Ce sera votre faute, de toute façon'.[133] Whilst Nathalie refers specifically to the way the train to Toulon stops or is stopped because Nadia is on board, this sentence could be applied to the way she is judged and blamed for what befalls her throughout the novel. Through further references to rights throughout the novel, NDiaye underlines the fact that Nadia and other minorities are not protected by laws or

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[127] Kaprièlian, 'L'Écrivain Marie NDiaye aux prises avec le monde', *Les Inrockuptibles,* (2009) <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2009/08/30/actualite/actualite/lecrivain-marie-ndiaye-aux-prises-avec-le-monde/> [accessed 28/08/2020]; Ndiaye (2008).
[128] Kaprièlian (2009); Ndiaye (2008).
[129] Ndiaye (2008), p.220; Catherine Raissiguier, *Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration, and Citizenship in France*, (ProQuest Ebook Central: Stanford University Press, 2010) <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=544003.> [accessed 23/11/2020] p.89.
[130] Niang (2019), p.278.
[131] See also NDiaye (2007), pp.31, 169. Other characters are described as not having the right to attack Ange, Nadia or her ex-husband. However, the stranger's treatment of Nadia; the fact that Ange is stabbed; and Nadia's ex-husband is murdered by a police officer reveal that these laws do not protect ethnic minorities or those associated with them.
[132] Ibid. p.339.
[133] Ibid. p.256.

abstraction policies which deny others 'le droit' to attack or discriminate against them.[134] Instead, Nadia is marginalised and driven from her homeland without recourse to justice and the police officer Lanton murders her ex-husband with seeming impunity. The novel thereby conveys the potential disjuncture between symbolic universalist laws and a reality in which the rights of those who are marked are easily transgressed, an issue that has been central to French feminist and anti-racist campaigns in recent decades.[135]

NDiaye also explores how the judgement Nadia faces on a daily basis in French society, even before the wave of xenophobia hits Bordeaux, is related to the way she is gendered as an ethnic minority woman. For example, her unbridled thoughts reveal the pressure placed on her by society to be a good mother to Ralph as well as the fact that her internalised racism means she becomes, as Asibong notes, one of the 'dead' mothers who is emotionally unavailable to her son.[136] NDiaye also portrays how it is not just the ethnic majority that judge her as her ex-husband who works as an electrician views Nadia's work as a primary teacher, often a female-dominated role, with 'condescendance'.[137] One of the main examples of such judgements in the novel is related to Nadia's increasing size as her weight spirals out of control because of her monstrous pregnancy and the fatty foods that seem to have caused it. Brendlé notes how the derisory comments made by Noget, Lanton and Nadia's daughter-in-law reveal how she is penetrated by the judgemental gaze 'de l'autre'.[138] It is also worth noting that her ethnic minority ex-husband is complicit in this penetrative gaze as he not only exclaims 'tu es devenue énorme!' but also judges this as an example of her privilege and selfishness.[139] NDiaye thus shows how ethnic minority women's bodies are transformed into objects to be gazed upon and judged in French society as Nadia is body-shamed by members of various different groups and institutions. These examples also reflect Nathalie's statement that people will always see Nadia as responsible for the judgements placed upon her and how NDiaye undermines this idea.[140] Although others blame her entirely for both her weight and her failures as a mother, NDiaye exposes how these are products of the exclusionary discourses fed to her and, as a result, that French society shares the blame. Furthermore, through her depictions of the penetration of Nadia's personal space, identity and even body, NDiaye undermines the process that produces her as an abject threat to the nation by highlighting how she is made vulnerable through the unequal power relations this process reproduces.

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[134] Ibid. pp.31, 169.
[135] Lépinard and Mazur (2009).
[136] NDiaye (2007), p.160; See Asibong (2013).
[137] NDiaye (2007), p.202.
[138] Brendlé, (2017) p.388.
[139] NDiaye (2007), p.146.
[140] Ibid. p.256.

Nonetheless, in spite of her desire not to be judged, Nadia herself is guilty of discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. Just as she looks down on her parents, she judges her ex-husband's proletarian tastes and habits and views Corinna with horror and condescension because of her sex work. Her attitude towards her young ethnic minority female pupils illustrates how she has internalised the racist and sexist attitudes of the ethnic majority:

> *En vérité, je ne me suis montrée ni juste, ni hospitalière, ni correcte avec ces enfants-là, je me suis montrée dure et distante, voire ricaneuse, souhaitant au fond de moi leur élimination, leur envol loin de ma chère école, et ne m'arrivait-il pas de les imaginer comme des pigeons sur lesquels on peut tirer impunément tant ils sont nombreux et sales et superflus?*[141]

Here, Nadia's comparison of the girls to pigeons and her suggestion that they are '*sales et superflus'* re-enacts the dehumanisation, inferiorisation and levelling of which she has been the victim. She employs the same racist discourses that were once used to justify violence against the colonised. This can also be linked to abjection as she produces them in this way to make it possible to imagine that they are wholly separate, such that they can be denied belonging in the school whilst she is not.

The passage above is one of the repressed memories which Nadia is forced to confront as she grapples with her exclusion and how her self-construction differs from how others produce her and her own behaviour. In an earlier passage she asks: '*Suis-je donc une femme si corrompue? Croyant être exemplaire, respectueuse et bonne, je me serais trompée à ce point?*'.[142] Her own questions reveal that, as someone who had been policing symbolic borders and judging others in French society, her behaviour was completely lacking in morals, just as Sarkozy's France with its 'atmosphère de flicage' was immoral in NDiaye's eyes.[143] Nadia comes to realise that her view of Ange was equally false as he is 'l'exact contraire de la bonté' because of his racism, sexism and violence towards his pupils.[144] NDiaye thus reveals how those who police symbolic borders through discriminatory behaviour not only perpetuate violence but can also simultaneously conceive and present themselves as exemplars of universalist ideals, thereby masking both the violence and power relations involved.

Nevertheless, Nadia's comment about her negative attitude towards her pupils is also a source of hope in the novel. As the final passage in italics linked to her repressed memories it signals not only her newfound awareness of the violence in which she had become complicit but also a change in attitude as she then exclaims: 'À présent, me dis-je, comme je m'occuperais bien

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[141] Ibid. p.361. Original emphasis. Originally quoted in Marmont (2019), p.52.
[142] NDiaye (2007), pp.163-64. Original emphasis.
[143] Kaprièlian (2009).
[144] NDiaye (2007), p.225.

de ces enfants!'.[145] Although she remains excluded from France and has been replaced by Corinna, she has reconnected with her parents and, whilst still unable to heal her relationship with her son, at least recognises her role in him becoming 'non pas un homme mais un garçon égaré tâchant de faire bonne figure'.[146] NDiaye uses the symbolism of her heart to express this as it is transformed from a '*vieux cœur gras et pesant*', when she is in France and gaining weight from the French food and pregnancy, to one that is 'affable et doux, […] apaisé'.[147] From being trapped or hemmed in by the fat surrounding her heart, the result of the exclusionary ethnocentric and sexist discourses she has internalised, she is then freed from their immoral constraints and able to relate to others hospitably, as Jordan has demonstrated.[148]

This transformation is also highlighted through her pregnancy as, shortly after her change in attitude when she re-joins her parents, Nadia recounts how an indescribable, black creature escapes from her body and out of the house. The connection to her accepting her past leads Brendlé and Bujor to suggest that this fantastic being is the materialisation of Nadia's denial.[149] As Noget and his food can, as demonstrated earlier, be seen as allegories of an ethnocentric and sexist French nationalism, I would go further to argue that this creature symbolises the marking process generally, the cause of her denial of her origins. The fact that this birth appears triggered by either, or both, her parents' wholesome food or her change in attitude conveys how Nadia now rejects such discourses and the fantastic figures they create through stranger fetishism and the production of minorities as objects of abjection. Whilst NDiaye underlines how stranger fetishism remains an issue in French society, she therefore illustrates how Nadia personally overcomes such discourses and practices. She is able to deconstruct the symbolic and intersecting barriers through which French society essentialises ethnic minority women and which are incompatible with republican ideals and yet often masked and reproduced through universalist discourses.

The Exclusionary Mechanisms of the Barbarism/Civilisation Dichotomy in 'L'Encrier'

As demonstrated in the first section, the narrator of 'L'Encrier' marks *l'étrangère* in relation to her gender and ethnicity in order to produce her as a stranger within the nation. This is the case even when he believes that he can incorporate her and her difference for his benefit, as this is based on the notion that they are discrete entities separated by symbolic borders. Further, as this process

[145] Ibid. p.361.
[146] Ibid. p.371.
[147] Ibid. pp.159, 372.
[148] Jordan (2017), p.90.
[149] Brendlé, (2017) p.261; Bujor, (2018) p.477.

would have reinforced his agency and privilege to the detriment of *l'étrangère*'s, such discourses arise from and perpetuate unequal power relations. These power relations are also at work when, after he believes that she has betrayed him through her relationship with Lynx, he produces her and other ethnic minority women as barbaric figures. As in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, it is the seeming rejection of the unuttered behavioural rules that accompany this marking that blurs the boundaries between self and other in the eyes of the narrator and therefore leads him to transform *l'étrangère* into an object of abjection. This figure of the barbarian can be related to both Ahmed's fetishised strangers and Kristeva's object of abjection as it is imbricated in the production of two opposing identities, the barbaric outsider and the civilised self and nation, whilst the symbolic expulsion of the barbarian serves to reinforce the symbolic borders between the two. With reference to Maria Boletsi and Tzvetan Todorov's works on barbarism, this section explores how the narrator produces *l'étrangère* as a threatening outsider and the violent power relations involved.[150] It also examines how Lê depicts this as intersecting with gender and class-based discrimination and how she undermines this process through her use of the fantastic.

The desire for power and prestige is an important motivating factor for the narrator throughout 'L'Encrier'. His frustration that his wish to 'devenir enfin quelqu'un' through *l'étrangère* is thwarted is replicated when he does not receive the respect he believes he is owed as a teacher in the *banlieues*.[151] His derogatory description of his pupils as 'gibier d'échafaud' suggests that this sense of entitlement is linked less to the idea of equal dignity than, as in the first example, a sense of superiority based on his class origins.[152] This attitude is also accompanied by the assumption that the success or happiness of those whom he sees as inferior, like Lynx and *l'étrangère*, poses a threat to him: 'Il me semblait que s'ils étaient heureux, c'était à mes dépens'.[153] His own hatred for this couple grows in accordance with their success. The sense of belonging that the narrator seeks is therefore shaped by this sense of superiority as a white, middle-class man and accompanying yearning to dominate others, and it is of this which the extreme-right party and the *Chef* take advantage. He explains how the *Chef* gave him a sense of purpose and belonging within the party:

> Depuis que je le connais, j'ai appris à ne plus m'interroger sur moi et à comprendre que pour me sentir utile je devais contribuer à l'édification d'un nouveau pays, nettoyé de la crasse morale et des impuretés que des cohortes barbares ont introduites sur notre sol.

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[150] Tzvetan Todorov, *La peur des barbares : au-delà du choc des civilisations* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 2008); Maria Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
[151] Lê (2002), p.22.
[152] Ibid. p.21.
[153] Ibid. p.22.

> La décadence des mœurs a tout envahi, plus nuisible à notre civilisation que le chiendent aux cultures.[154]

Discouraging any form of self-reflexivity which might alert the narrator to his own prejudices, the *Chef* instead channels them towards the construction of a new collective identity and nation which will afford the narrator a sense of belonging and empowerment through the exclusion of others. Lê highlights his ability to contribute to this cause as the *Chef*'s speech-writer: 'Le Chef lui-même avait conscience que son personnage était façonné par mes phrases'.[155] Through his speech-writing, the narrator therefore gains a 'sentiment de puissance' because he has the potential to shape the image of the *Chef* and to influence others through him as a result.[156] By extension, he has the power to produce the figure of the barbarian in the minds of the public and shape attitudes and behaviour towards those who are constructed in this way. Indeed, the narrator states that he will use his inkwell, a gift from *l'étrangère*, against her and Lynx to 'les exterminer, eux et leurs semblables'.[157] Ultimately, he is partially successful in this goal and it is worthwhile examining the discourses through which he achieves this.

In the excerpt above and the speeches described by the narrator, the identity of the 'cohortes barbares' is never explicitly related to immigrants or ethnic minorities. However, the way the narrator describes 'cosmopolitisme' and 'mariages mixtes' as a threat to French values in a later speech makes it clear that it is ethnic minorities like *l'étrangère* who are produced as barbarous.[158] The opposition the narrator creates between the 'barbares' and 'notre sol […] notre civilisation' portrays the former, and the impurities they have supposedly introduced, as foreign in France. The fact that this opposition is involved in the construction of French national identity is highlighted through implicit links with the *Marseillaise*. Phrases such as 'cohortes barbares' and 'impuretés' mirror the anthem's references to the 'cohortes etrangères' invading the country and threatening tyranny and whose 'sang impur' should be made to irrigate the nation's soil.[159] Through such intertextuality, Lê underlines how French national identity is produced through its supposed opposition to immigrants or ethnic minorities conceived as threatening and barbaric foreigners in the nation.

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[154] Ibid. pp.18-19.
[155] Ibid. p.23.
[156] Ibid. p.28.
[157] Ibid. p.22.
[158] Ibid. p.23.
[159] Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle, 'La Marseillaise de Rouget de Lisle', *Élysée,* (2021) <https://www.elysee.fr/la-presidence/la-marseillaise-de-rouget-de-lisle> [accessed 26/05/2021].

In his analysis of the civilisation/barbarism binary, Tzvetan Todorov argues that barbarians are conceived as being 'du côté du chaos, de l'arbitraire, ils ne connaissent pas l'ordre social'.[160] In this sense, the barbarian is produced as a figure lacking positive qualities. This is clear in the narrator's suggestion that the presence of barbarians in the nation has led to 'la décadence des mœurs', as though they were not just changing but deteriorating or disappearing altogether. The narrator's speech therefore constructs the barbarian as an object of abjection which must be expelled because it supposedly disrupts social order and civilised society by replacing them with chaos, immorality and impurity.[161] He emphasises this idea of barbarians as a threat to the nation through imagery suggesting foreigners and ethnic minorities are taking over French soil. Similarly, the words 'cohortes' and 'envahir' indicate not only large numbers entering the country but also their hostile and destructive nature. This construction of ethnic minorities as barbaric figures who pose a threat to the nation, as in the *Marseillaise*, justifies their symbolic or even physical expulsion from their homeland or adopted country. Yet the narrator masks the violence involved in this process through his use of the term 'nettoyer' in relation to this immorality and the people who supposedly embody it. This can also be linked to the way that *l'étrangère*'s murderers dump her body in a rubbish tip, conveying their disdain for her and reinforcing the image that they are 'cleaning up' the nation through her elimination.[162]

The narrator's depiction of ethnic minorities as barbarians and the kidnapping of *l'étrangère*, like the production of Nadia as an object of abjection, are intended to rebuild the nation's symbolic borders as well as those of the narrator's ego which, through the rhetoric of chaos and deterioration, are depicted as breached. In particular, the recurring references to 'morales', 'impuretés' and 'mœurs', convey the idea that the breaking down of these borders endangers values and traditions that are interpreted as fixed and central to French national identity and social order.[163] In other words, the loss of these values is portrayed as leading to the descent of the French nation into chaos and barbarism. This emphasis on values is unsurprising in a country which prides itself on being the home of human rights. However, the narrator at no point identifies these values or morals as French. Instead, his opposition and hierarchisation of civilisation and barbarism assigns a positive value to French moral standards through the depictions of other 'barbarous' cultures as devoid of morals. The employment of these dichotomized concepts reflects Maria Boletsi's assertion that barbarism 'operates as the negative standard, against which civilization measures its virtue, humanity, or level of sophistication'.[164] Lê

[160] Todorov (2008), p.35.
[161] Kristeva (1980), p.12.
[162] Lê (2002), p.28.
[163] Ibid. pp.23-24.
[164] Boletsi (2013), p.4.

therefore reveals how French civilisation can be depicted as (having been) pure, moral and civilised because barbarous cultures are seen as impure and immoral. Further, by refusing to see the values of other cultures as moral(s), such rhetoric creates a hierarchical universalism assuming that the particular beliefs associated with French civilisation are ideal and therefore universal principles.

Lê's depictions of such discourses reflect how extreme-Right parties such as the *Rassemblement national*, called the *Front national* until 2018, have often portrayed ethnic minorities, particularly those with postcolonial origins, as a threat within the French nation. Adrien Favell explains how, for example, the *Front national* capitalised on the fears driven by the economic crisis in the 1980s to argue that ethnic minorities and immigrants posed a threat to French culture and citizenship as well jobs and social welfare.[165] Further, research has shown how such tactics based on an ethnocentric understanding of national identity have been employed to create a sense of national belonging that could be manipulated to gain support from voters.[166] In 'L'Encrier' this influence functions on two levels as the *Chef* uses such discourses to gain the votes of people like the narrator with no historic ties to extreme-right politics and the narrator himself employs them to manipulate party members to kidnap *l'étrangère*. The narrator selects particularly violent and radical men whom he describes as 'ces fauves assoiffées de sang métèque'.[167] This conveys, firstly, the narrator's prejudice as he dehumanises these men and, secondly, how discourses about ethnic minorities as a threat to the nation can lead directly to violence. The narrator illustrates how violence against ethnic minorities reproduces a social hierarchy through his statement that 'ils voulaient la terreur tout de suite pour affirmer, ne fût-ce qu'un soir, leur supériorité'.[168] Likewise, although the narrator is not directly involved in *l'étrangère*'s murder and looks down on the men involved for their violent behaviour, Lê exposes how this middle-class man's speeches and behaviour are motivated by the same desire for a sense of superiority.

However, the idea that these men represent a minority in the party, as the *Chef* states when their involvement in *l'étrangère*'s murder is discovered, is challenged by the narrator's remark that they actually form the silent majority in the party.[169] Indeed, this kind of vitriolic xenophobic discourse is espoused by many characters throughout Linda Lê's novels, often intersecting with highly misogynist attitudes and behaviour. For example, Lou's white mother in

[165] Favell (1998), p.54.
[166] Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1988), p.283.
[167] Lê (2002), p.24.
[168] Ibid. p.26.
[169] Ibid. p.27.

Lame de fond renounces her daughter because she marries a man originally from Vietnam whilst, in *Œuvres Vives*, the son of a Vietnamese immigrant refuses any contact with his father and tries repeatedly to change his name because it reveals his foreign ancestry. In both cases, the same kind of dichotomous civilisation/barbarism discourse is used in relation to immigrants from former French colonies to justify these attitudes and the symbolic or physical violence to which they lead. Lê thus demonstrates how such beliefs are more common in France than the rhetoric about universalist values and ideals suggests. Furthermore, she explores how the narrator, in spite of his greater exposure to left-wing than right-wing politics, can be easily drawn into the party and become 'plus fanatique que les plus jusqu'au-boutistes du parti'.[170] In this way, Lê, like NDiaye, highlights the facility with which extremist exclusionary discourses can be spread and internalised in a society in which ethnic minorities are fetishised as strangers.

Nonetheless, it is not just among the ranks of the far-Right that the idea of ethnic minorities posing a threat holds sway in France or in Lê's *œuvre*. In her study of immigration and insecurity in France, Jane Freedman highlights that anti-immigrant sentiment has been present in parties and policymaking across the political spectrum.[171] In particular, she notes how polls carried out in 2002 indicate that the majority of those surveyed believed that French values and their lives were endangered by high levels of immigration.[172] Whilst acknowledging that this can, in part, be related to the 'banalisation' of extreme-Right ideas because of the success of the *Front national* in the previous election, Freedman argues that the prevalence of anti-immigrant policies 'could not have been achieved if some of the ideas espoused by the Front were not already embedded within French opinion'.[173] As well as depicting how the most virulent forms of racism are less marginal than might be expected, Lê also elucidates how the notion of ethnic minorities as threatening, barbaric figures is adopted by those on the Left. In *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien*, the father who essentialises his Vietnamese wife as an idealised figure also produces their young daughter as uncivilised, uncontrollable and therefore a threat. He describes her as a '*sauvage*' whenever she challenges his behaviour and accuses him of hypocrisy because he inferiorises and mistreats her mother whilst also purporting to defend republican universalist values.[174] The term 'savage' is one of barbarism's main descriptors and, in the novel, elicits the same kind of abject reaction: 'je lus dans ses yeux comme un dégoût pour ma personne, pour ma conduite de *sauvage*'.[175] The father's production of his ethnic minority daughter as abject when

[170] Ibid. p.24.
[171] Jane Freedman, *Immigration and Insecurity in France*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
[172] Ibid. p.41.
[173] Ibid. p.42.
[174] Lê (2020), p.48.
[175] Ibid. p.121; See Boletsi (2013), p.4.

she exposes his failure to uphold his own ideals makes her and her behaviour the issue and detracts attention from his own. By conceiving her as a savage threat and symbolically expelling her from his ego as a white man he is therefore able to reproduce the social hierarchy which privileges him and his self-construction as a civilised man embodying French universalist values. In this vein, Lê elucidates how the barbarism and civilisation dichotomy is employed by those on the Left with reference to universalist values to maintain a racialised and gendered hierarchy and an anti-ethnic minority sentiment already embedded in French society.

Lê's decision to explore the barbarism/civilisation binary exposes not only the violent and exclusionary attitudes and behaviour towards ethnic minorities in modern-day France but also how this is a legacy of the country's imperialist past. This common trope in colonial discourse presented the colonised as inferior, uncivilised and a potential threat to civilisation and the French as the personification of its universalist values and, consequently, of civilised society.[176] This hierarchical universalism reproduced inequalities since, as Todorov points out, it was used, in the guise of the 'mission civilisatrice', to justify the invasion, colonisation and subjugation of people implicitly or explicitly labelled as barbaric around the world.[177] Todorov notes that continuity with colonialist discourses can be seen in French foreign policy and humanitarianism as they are shaped by a belief in the superiority and universality of French values. He describes this as a form of 'ethnocentrisme naïf' and argues that 'L'universalisme des valeurs menace alors l'idée que les populations humaines sont égales entre elles, et donc aussi l'universalité de l'espèce'.[178] Through her writing, Lê demonstrates that both this kind of naïve ethnocentrism and more aggressive xenophobia are at work within as well as beyond French borders. Further, the way these challenge 'l'universalité de l'espèce' by inferiorising and dehumanising ethnic minorities is revealed to be inherited from both French imperialism and the republican universalist discourses mobilised to uphold it.

Lê also explores the links between ethnocentrism, sexism and class issues as the explicit use of moral arguments against immigrants in the narrator's speeches is accompanied by implicit economic and gendered ones. Firstly, the narrator's repeated use of the term 'rastaquouère' suggests that that wealthy and flashy foreigners are becoming rich at the expense of the white working class majority.[179] This reflects political discourses, adopted particularly but not exclusively by far-Right parties, that link the presence of immigrants in France to unemployment or present

[176] Boletsi (2013), p.82.
[177] Todorov (2008), p.31.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Lê (2002), pp.24, 27.

them as taking advantage of social welfare.[180] Secondly, the statement that a 'Mata-Hari' has been placed in every household suggests that 'exotic' women are particularly dangerous because they tempt men to then infiltrate and contaminate not just the nation but also individual families and, therefore, all levels of society.[181] Links between the term 'invasion' and this intersection of class issues, sexism and racism therefore imply that foreigners, particularly women, are morally and financially impoverishing the nation.[182]

Ultimately, the narrator's production of ethnic minority women in this way through his speeches not only facilitates his plan to have *l'étrangère* kidnapped but incites the men involved to torture and kill her. His gendered and racialised depiction of her as a barbaric threat allows him and the men involved to conceive themselves as the victims of such women and the defenders of the nation and French masculinity. They therefore assign themselves the right to judge and condemn *l'étrangère*. This reinforces unequal power relations and the men's sense of superiority as it masks the violence of their discourses and criminal behaviour and how it goes against the republican universalist values they claimas their heritage. The judgement of *l'étrangère* can be elucidated with reference to its intertextuality with Franz Kafka's short story *In The Penal Colony*. As with the condemned man, *l'étrangère* is judged by an unofficial body, the narrator and his thugs, and automatically condemned for 'disobeying and insulting [her] superior[s]'.[183] A specially devised harrow literally inscribes the command 'Honour your superiors' so deeply upon the condemned man's body that he dies with blood streaming from his body. The same sentence is symbolically carved into *l'étrangère*'s body as her judges stab her to death and her blood is later shown to have flowed from her body to appear in the narrator's ink well some time later. Yet, unlike the condemned man, *l'étrangère* has her judgement inscribed upon her body through the marking process before her later condemnation. It is because she and her body have been gendered and racialised, and assigned a related social position, that the command and condemnation to 'Honour your superiors' can be symbolically impressed upon her.[184] Consequently, the horrific torture inflicted on the condemned man is depicted by Lê as a more systematic process because it is applied to someone, and therefore potentially anyone, who is marked as an ethnic minority woman.

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[180] Freedman (2004), p.41.
[181] Mata Hari was a Dutch woman and exotic dancer who was executed in France after the First World War on the charge of having spied for the German forces. See Lê (2002), p.24.
[182] Ibid. pp.23-24.
[183] Franz Kafka, *In The Penal Colony*, (2020) <https://www.kafka-online.info/in-the-penal-colony.html> [accessed 10/02/2020] p.1. https://www.kafka-online.info/in-the-penal-colony.html Accessed 10/02/2020
[184] Ibid. p.4.

The unequal power relations involved in this process are also evident in the way the narrator denies *l'étrangère* a voice as he constructs her first as an exotic commodity and then as a barbarian. The narrative reflects this as his voice as a white French man is the one that dominates the pages of the story as well as the *Chef*'s speeches. This reflects the way in which ethnic minority women have often been silenced in both political and society generally, an issue highlighted by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Claire Hancock in relation to the US and French contexts respectively.[185] As a result of this, ethnic minority women's experiences can be overlooked, including in anti-racist or feminist movements, because of the intersecting nature of the discrimination they face. Yet, whilst Lê portrays this silencing and how it facilitates the reproduction of the narrator and other white men's privilege, she also undermines this through her use of the fantastic. *L'étrangère* commands the agency that the narrator wishes to deny her through the way haunst him after her death. First, the narrator states that, because of various setbacks his party faces, 'il me semblait que le fantôme de l'étrangère nous poursuivait de sa vindicte'.[186] Later, as he tries to write a speech for the *Chef*, he hears the phrase '*Treize coups de couteau!*' emanating from the inkwell he received from *l'étrangère*: within it the ink has turned into her blood and her fear-filled eyes stare out at him.[187] Finally, he continues to hear the same voice and phrase resonating in his head and, when he hands his speech to the *Chef* who visits him to give him some of his birthday cake, he discovers that he has written the same phrase repeatedly. Driven mad by these visions, whether truly fantastic or hallucinated, he grabs hold of the knife used for the cake and stabs his own boss thirteen times.

In her analysis of *Calomnies*, in which a woman is driven to suicide by her family because of her unrequited incestuous love for her brother, Dao argues that the depiction of the ghost haunting the family resists a victim-based narrative.[188] Similarly, by portraying *l'étrangère* as haunting the man responsible for her kidnapping and then death through his failure to intervene, Lê defies narratives which present ethnic minority women as victims lacking agency. Through driving the remorseless narrator mad, *l'étrangère* sets in motion events that avenge her own death as the man fomenting the narrator and nation's sexist and racist attitudes and behaviour faces the same violent death as *l'étrangère*. Moreover, the narrator is haunted by the result of his ethnocentric patriarchal attitude and it is likely that the punishment he escaped for *l'étrangère*'s murder will be imposed on him for killing the *Chef*. Through her reincarnation in the inkwell, crossing the border between life and death, *l'étrangère* escapes the grasp of the narrator who,

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[185] Crenshaw (1989); Claire Hancock, 'Feminism from the Margin: Challenging the Paris/Banlieues divide', *Antipode,* 49:3 (2016).
[186] Lê (2002), p.29.
[187] Ibid. p.30.
[188] Dao (2012).

priding himself that the *Chef* is 'façonné par mes phrases', has tried to confine her to his gendered and racialised construction of her through his speeches.[189] Whilst conveying the power relations involved and their material impact, Linda Lê nevertheless refuses to essentialise *l'étrangère* further by producing her as a victim figure and gives her a unique literary means to regain her agency. In this vein, she underlines both her character's humanity and ungraspability and challenges the discourses, including those of republican universalism, employed to deny 'l'universalité de l'espèce'.[190] This can be related to Lê's own description of the subversive figure as someone who, throughout the ages, 'se lève pour opposer à l'anti-langage de la barbarie une réponse qui questionne l'humain et préserve le mystère de la vie'.[191] Similarly, Lê both exposes how discourses of barbarism function as dehumanising exclusionary mechanisms in French society and subverts this by illustrating the mysterious and impenetrable individuality of her ethnic minority female character and, by extension, humanity generally.

The Intersections of the Universal and the National

The portrayal of the inequalities Nadia and *l'étrangère* face because they are marked as particular in French society, eventually culminating in one of them fleeing the country and the other being murdered, suggests that the universalist principle of difference-blindness is more often invoked than enacted in French society. In both cases, various characters produce these women and other ethnic minority characters as out of place in the French nation because of their or their parents' supposed foreign origins, regardless of their citizenship or nationality. This creates, as Laura Jensen notes in her analysis of *Rosie Carpe* and *Trois femmes puissantes*, 'invisible and impermeable barriers between people of color and full, unqualified belonging in the Republic'.[192] Accordingly, the 'universal' is portrayed as having been appropriated not just by the French nation but by a particular ethnic group within the nation. Thus the ideals identified as integral to French identity not only pass as universal but they are only inhabitable by certain kinds of bodies, namely white bodies. As a result of this, the very presence of people who look different to the national ideal can be used, as in 'L'Encrier', as 'proof' that republican universalist ideals and French civilisation are being eroded. It is this alignment of whiteness with the nation and the universal through the fetishisation of others that means that the universality of all humans can be denied within the borders of the country in which universal human rights originated.[193]

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[189] Lê (2002), p.23.
[190] Todorov (2008), p.31.
[191] Lê (2005), p.159.
[192] Jensen, (2017) p.133.
[193] Todorov (2008), p.31.

Nevertheless, the particular development of the universal body in France and its relationship to the national body also need to be problematised. Christine Delphy argues that republican universalism is based on the exclusion of both women and (postcolonial) ethnic minorities: 'l'universel tel que nous le connaissons, non seulement exclut les femmes, les peuples du Tiers-Monde, les Noirs, les Arabes et autres "étrangers", mais [il] est fondé sur cette exclusion et sur la solidarité entre hommes blancs. Les deux termes – homme et blanc – ayant la même importance'.[194] The alignment between white male characters in *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and 'L'Encrier' through their fetishisation of the ethnic minority female protagonists does, indeed, suggest that the universal body is gendered and racialised. Further, this chapter has demonstrated how such an exclusionary image of the universal is dependent upon the intersectional marking of Nadia and *L'étrangère*. Yet, as mentioned earlier, there are multiple examples of white women marking Nadia and some of Lê's other ethnic minority female characters as different. As such, it is unclear from these passages whether the nation and the universal are portrayed as sharing the same symbolic borders in Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's oeuvres. In order to examine this, this section will compare the experiences of Nadia and *l'étrangère* to those of Rosie and Vega, two white female characters from Marie NDiaye's *Rosie Carpe* (2001) and Linda Lê's *Les aubes* (2000).

Throughout *Rosie Carpe*, the novel's eponymous protagonist is regularly exploited and marginalised in French society.[195] One example of this occurs when she is hired to work in a hotel and her new employer, Max, sexually exploits her. This older, married man takes advantage of Rosie's vulnerability as a young woman who has been abandoned by her parents and brother and is starting her first job after dropping out of university. As well as sleeping with her, he invites a friend to film them without seeking her consent or sharing the profits with her. This unequal power dynamic is reinforced throughout their relationship as Max controls not only her body but various other aspects of Rosie's life, including where she lives. Max's attitude demonstrates a sense of entitlement to women's bodies as a commodity not only for his own consumption and profit but also for others. Like the narrator of 'L'Encrier', he objectifies her because she is a woman and so produces her as particular and inferior. This perpetuates unequal power relations and reinforces his own privilege as a white man to the detriment of Rosie who is marked as out of place because of her gender.

In *Les aubes*, Vega is raped by her father when she is just a child. Her vulnerability is highlighted in the narrative as her drunken father rapes her whilst she holds on to her doll. Vega

[194] Delphy (1995 (2010)), p.307.
[195] NDiaye (2001/2009).

never reports his actions to the police and her lover, the narrator, explains the power relations in place that would have protected her rapist had she done so:

> Tu aurais vu se lever tous les notables, tous les pères scélérats, pour défendre l'honneur du boucher, leur pair débonnaire à la face écarlate, qu'ils jureraient incapable de faire du mal à une mouche. C'est contre toi que se serait retournée l'armée des hommes de bonne volonté toujours prêts à débusquer la femelle aguicheuse, perte de l'honnête citoyen.[196]

Once again the fact that women, or even girls, are marked out as particular is highlighted in the description of a girl as a 'femelle' reduced to her sex. This essentialisation leads to her being treated as an object to be used, violated and controlled by men. The statement that 'tous les notables, tous les pères scélérats' would defend her dad suggests that this kind of violence is facilitated by the power and influence of these men in society. Gendering Vega therefore creates a form of solidarity between these men which, in turn, they use to protect their own privilege. Further, by making the socially constructed mark of female gender appear as a naturalised category, this group is able to deny the violence of rape by blaming the victim(s): the discourse through which the marking takes place means Vega can be plausibly depicted as a flirt who has caused the downfall of 'l'honnête citoyen'. The fact that a young girl who is raped by her dad can be portrayed in this way reveals how a white man is more readily seen as the ideal embodiment of the universal citizen and, consequently, that his privilege is (re)produced and protected not just in spite of but through his violation of the rights of those excluded from the universal. Likewise, the army that would threaten the white girl and transgress the values of equality, freedom and fraternity to protect her father is not a cohort of foreigners but the white men of her town. In addition, the narrator states that Vega's own mother would have supported her father, suggesting that her mother has internalised this gendered and inegalitarian conceptualisation of universalism.[197]

In these four texts, Nadia, *l'étrangère,* Rosie and Vega are all the victims of hierarchical social relations that are (re)produced and masked through the white male characters' association of themselves with the universal through their marking of these women as particular. However, whilst all of these women are excluded from the image of the universal, there is an important difference between them. Although Rosie and Vega are inferiorised by these men and denied equal treatment because they are seen as divergent from the image of the ideal citizen, their right to be in and belong to the nation is never questioned. By contrast, Nadia and *l'étrangère* are perpetually produced as incapable of embodying the cultural norms and ideals of the ethnic

[196] Lê (2000), p.115.
[197] Ibid.

majority population that are conceived as universal. This remains the case regardless of their nationality or whether they were brought up in a foreign country or in France.

In this way, Nadia and *l'étrangère* are always fetishised as strangers in France and this makes their situation even more precarious than that of the white female characters. This is evident in the way that attitudes towards them/the difference they supposedly embody can suddenly transform from being welcoming or tolerant to hostile. This pattern occurs across Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's *oeuvres*: in Lê's *Calomnies* (1993) and *Lettre morte* (1999) the ethnic minority female protagonists are first treated like commodities to be controlled and exploited by their white lovers and, when they dare to leave them, as objects of abjection. Likewise, in *Les dits d'un idiot* (1995) Ragot treats Mortesaison, recently arrived in France, with condescending paternalism as a foreigner who can be 'sauvée' and then, when she abandons him, as a hateful and dangerous ingrate.[198] *En famille* portrays how Fanny, who was previously marginalised but tolerated within her ethnic majority family, is formally excluded. Although the family blame her for this metamorphosis in their attitude towards her, by suggesting it is related to her behaviour, my third chapter demonstrates how it is only possible because of their pre-existing intersectional prejudices against her. In other words, as the analysis of *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and 'L'Encrier' revealed, such transformations only occur because the ethnic minority female characters have already been fetishised as strangers. Fetishising Nadia and *l'étrangère* as strangers, even when they are tolerated, therefore paves the way for the former's expulsion from the country and the kidnapping, torture and murder of the latter. This social exclusion and even violence as a result of their ethnicity is compounded by the inequalities they face because they are also gendered. This is exemplified in the commodification of *l'étrangère* as an exotic, sexualised object and by Nadia's belief that Ange would not have married her had he not already had children with a white wife.[199]

The ethnic majority characters in Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's novels therefore have a different attitude towards female characters from ethnic minority backgrounds. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that, as Maxim Silverman notes, the universality of the human subject as set out during the Enlightenment was immediately incorporated within a national framework which created a 'distinction between nationals (citizens) and non-nationals (non-citizens)'.[200] In other words, universalism immediately became a form of national particularism. However, the universal subject was not, as mentioned earlier, only limited to a national framework as many French nationals, including women and the working classes, were deemed inassimilable to the universal. The fact that white women continue to be marked as particular in

[198] Lê (1995), p.134.
[199] See NDiaye (2007), p.224.
[200] Silverman (1992), p.27.

these novels set in contemporary France suggests that the borders of the universal body are still not based on citizenship alone. Describing universalism merely as a form of national particularism therefore ignores how the universal body is marked by the privilege of masculinity as well as whiteness. Joan Scott provides a more nuanced argument when she explains that women are made to signify 'internal difference and irreparable antagonism' whilst ethnic minorities, particularly of North African descent, are 'by definition […] outside French cultural boundaries; even if they were born in France'.[201] However, she then compares the desire to keep women out of political roles representing the nation to a desire to exclude them from the 'body of the nation'.[202] The suggestion that white women are excluded from the image of the nation is highly problematic because it conflates their experiences with those of ethnic minorities. The fact that Scott's analysis of how ethnic minorities were marginalised in the women's parity movement overlooks the implications for ethnic minority women reveals how this conflation can result in an incomplete understanding of the power relations leading to the marginalisation of ethnic minority women. In contrast, NDiaye and Lê's depictions of ethnic minority women's particular experiences shed light on the intersectional nature of the social hierarchies which shape their lives as well as the images of the national and the universal.

Nadia and *l'étrangère*'s experiences of intersecting racism and sexism therefore call for a new way of conceiving how ethnic minority women are fetishised as strangers in France. The way in which their bodies, along with those of all women, are constructed by the male characters as incapable of embodying the universal conveys how, as Delphy has argued, the universal body is both gendered and racialised. However, Rosie and Vega's inclusion in the image of the French nation suggests that the borders of the national body and the universal body are not fully coterminous. Instead, NDiaye and Lê's depictions elucidate how Nadia and *l'étrangère* are excluded not only from a racialised and gendered universalism but also from a racialised nationalism. The conflation of French identity with the universal body through republican discourse therefore creates blind spots which make it difficult to discern how intersecting forms of privilege and power are (re)produced through the disempowerment, marginalisation and exclusion of ethnic minority women.

[201] Scott (2005), p.40.
[202] Ibid. p.38.

Exposing the Imbrication of Republican Universalism with Intersectional Power Relations

Adopting an intersectional analytical lens has made it possible to illuminate how, through *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and 'L'Encrier', Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê explore the complex and problematic nature of the marking process and the power relations involved. In spite of the ethnic minority female characters' very different origins, these tales reveal how they are both constructed as strangers within the French nation. They highlight how this cultural construction dehumanises, inferiorises, and excludes Nadia and *l'étrangère* from the idea of both the universal and the nation. Further, this racialisation is shaped by and intersects with the way they are also marked with gender difference. Whilst the treatment of ethnic minority women in the novels contradicts the ideals of republican universalism, particularly abstraction, the authors also demonstrate how this failure is a legacy of the country's colonial and slave-trading past. Furthermore, they reveal how the essentialisation of these women and the unequal power relations involved are often masked by and consequently reproduced through universalist discourses, including the idea of French civilisation or a merely superficial adherence to abstraction. In other words, they expose how republican universalist discourses can be imbricated in the reproduction of intersectional power relations incompatible with the principles of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.

In addition, NDiaye and Lê's portrayals of how other characters transform Nadia and *l'étrangère* into objects of abjection reveal the ambiguity of the marking process as the ethnic majority characters require the presence of strangers and barbarians in order to mentally reform the self and the nation as chimerically homogeneous, apart and civilised. They also convey the material impact of these discourses as the marking process is involved in the creation of unuttered social norms and rules with which their characters are meant to comply. In particular, this involves accepting their inferiorisation and, in the case of *l'étrangère*, their exotic commodification. The transformation in attitudes towards these women illustrates how the failure to follow these rules leads to their construction as objects of abjection, a process which justifies extreme violence in both cases. In other words, they expose how widespread marking, including stranger fetishism, is a pre-condition for extremist views and xenophobia. Lê and NDiaye thus shed new light on the hostile atmosphere for ethnic minorities which both identify as characterising French society in the early 2000s and by which they are seriously concerned. Yet they also reject reductive victim narratives about their characters as NDiaye depicts Nadia's complicity in the racism and sexism of French society but also her ability to overcome such discourses. Meanwhile, Lê's use of the fantastic subverts the narrator's silencing of *l'étrangère* and reassigns her agency through her haunting of her murderer. As such, these two very different

works nonetheless converge in their elucidation and subversion of the intersecting racism and sexism faced by ethnic minority women and the way such discrimination can be facilitated rather than overcome through republican universalist discourses.

The next two chapters aim to build upon these conclusions by examining in greater detail the unuttered gender and race-based social norms with which Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's ethnic minority female characters are expected to comply in French society. In particular, this will reveal how integration, and the promise of attaining *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* through this process, facilitates the oppression of ethnic minority women by silencing them and immobilising them socially and economically. This approach will shed new light both on the experiences and agency of these women as they negotiate how they are directed in French society and also the potentially treacherous nature of republican universalist discourse when its enactment diverges from its ideals.

Chapter Two – Integration, Inequality and the Pygmalion Paradigm: The Oppressive Moulding of Ethnic Minority Women in Linda Lê's *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot*

The promise of *Liberté*, *Égalité, Fraternité* is the cornerstone of French republican discourse and is commonly conceived as dependent upon the abstraction of citizens as universal, rather than as subjects tied to shared affiliations and identities. In other words, the individual, and by extension society as a whole, can attain equality and freedom through their independence from 'any forms of collective-coercive authority of belonging', such as ethnic groupings, and their commitment to respect and promote republican ideals.[1] This idea is central to the republican integration model set out by and institutionalised through the establishment of the *Haut Conseil à l'intégration* (HCI) in 1989 which aimed to tackle socio-economic inequalities and foster national unity around republican universalist values.[2] Although the HCI definition of integration applied to anyone marginalised in French society, integration discourse and research within and beyond the HCI has often concentrated on immigrants and French nationals of foreign origin and issues specific to them.[3] Consequently, the integration policy of different governments in the last thirty years, even after the HCI's dissolution, shares a common focus on shaping immigrants' behaviour through, firstly, inculcating republican values and, secondly, encouraging the integration of individuals as universal subjects rather than of communities into French society.[4] Integration is portrayed as a means to protect universalist principles and as a promise to immigrants and ethnic minorities that they will also benefit from freedom, equality and fraternity.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, Linda Lê depicts how her ethnic minority female characters are marked by others as the embodiment of ethnic and gender differences and excluded from conceptions of both the universal and national body, regardless of nationality. This process is irreconcilable with an egalitarian integration process as it arises from and reproduces oppressive power relations.[5] Through its analysis of the experiences of the niece

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[1] Amiraux (2010), p.69.
[2] Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991), p.14.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Amiraux discusses the importance of education and individual emancipation in integration: Amiraux (2010). See Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI), 'Le Contrat et l'intégration', (2003) <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/044000033.pdf> [accessed 31/03/2020]; République française, 'Qu'est-ce que le contrat d'intégration républicaine (CIR) ?', *Service Public,* (25/06/2021) <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F17048> [accessed 28/02/2020]. The CAI (2003) and CIR (2016) present upholding republican values as integral to naturalisation.
[5] See Chapter One and Guillaumin's argument that oppression precedes marking: Guillaumin (1995).

and Mortesaison in *Calomnies* (1993) and *Les dits d'un idiot* (1995), respectively, this chapter demonstrates how Lê's depiction of intersectional power relations illustrates the failure to enact an integration process that demarginalises characters 'laissés-pour-compte' and safeguards an egalitarian French society.[6] It also argues that integration discourses are implicated in the perpetuation of social hierarchies in the novel as the promise of attaining *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* through integration is used by French characters to control, exploit and marginalise the ethnic minority female characters. Indeed, it explores how Lê's novels portray the integration process encouraged by some ethnic majority characters as a modern-day *mission civilisatrice* through which the inferiorisation and subjugation of (post)colonial ethnic minorities is re-enacted on French soil.

In order to achieve this, this chapter adopts an intersectional framework based on Marilyn Frye's conceptualisation of oppression as something that immobilises and silences minorities and Sara Ahmed's notion of power as a mode of directionality, which builds on Frye's work and examines the role of deceptive discourses in restrictively directing minorities. Both concepts lend themselves to an intersectional analysis as they account for the way in which multiple inter-related barriers, including intersecting forms of discrimination and socio-economic issues, serve to direct minorities and reproduce structural inequalities.[7] This analytical lens is applied to the intertextuality that Lê creates between the niece and Mortesaison's experiences, and the myth of Pygmalion and his sculpture Galatea. This elucidates how French men and society generally, like Pygmalion sculpting the ideal woman out of ivory, employ integration discourses and practices in attempts to restrictively mould these ethnic minority women's beliefs, behaviour and writing. Consequently, this chapter argues that Lê's adaptation of the Pygmalion myth helps develop an intersectional feminist consciousness of the ways in which allegedly universalist and liberating integration discourses and practices can reproduce inegalitarian social hierarchies in French society.

Linda Lê's novels are replete with implicit and explicit references to tales and figures from classical Greek and Roman mythology, as evidenced in the titles of her novels *Les trois parques* (1997) and *Cronos* (2010). This intertextuality has been explored in several articles, particularly in relation to the figures of Antigone and also Medea, Electra, Cronos and Oedipus.[8] Pygmalion and

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[6] Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991), p.18.
[7] Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983).
[8] Sabine Loucif, 'Le fantastique dans *Les trois parques* de Linda Lê', in *Redefining the Real: The Fantastic in Contemporary French and Francophone Women's Writing,* ed. by Margaret-Anne Hutton (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009); Ching Selao, 'Les figures mythiques de Linda Lê', in *Les réécrivains : enjeux transtextuels dans la littérature moderne d'expression française,* ed. by Patrick Bergerson and Marie Carrière (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011); Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, 'Voyelles mutilées, consonnes aux jambages arrachés: Linda Lê's Compulsive

his construction of the perfect woman, in the shape of the statue Galatea, can be described as one of various mythological motifs that appears 'de façon obsessionnelle' throughout Lê's fictional works, appearing explicitly in *Calomnies* (1993) and implicitly in *Les dits d'un idiot* (1995), *Voix* (1998), *Lettre morte* (1999), 'Voix Off' in *Autres jeux avec le feu* (2002), and *In memoriam* (2007).[9] Pygmalion is a classical myth which first appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It depicts how the eponymous Cypriot protagonist, unable to find love, chooses to create a sculpture of the ideal woman. By moulding ivory, he creates a statue so beautiful and life-like that he falls in love with it. Sacrificing and praying to Venus to find a woman of her likeness, the goddess rewards Pygmalion's skill and faith by transforming Galatea into flesh.[10] In a brief analysis of this myth in 'Voix Off' and *Solo* (1988), a novel Lê removed from her bibliography, Michèle Bacholle-Boŝković argues that Lê employs such intertextuality in order to explore how men fashion women to meet their own tastes, dreams and requirements.[11] Similarly, Tracy Hallstead identifies Pygmalion's sculpting of Galatea as the perfect woman as a useful metaphor for understanding how the production of women as inherently flawed in Western patriarchal societies is used to 'chisel' women's lives down such that they become silent and relatively immobile socially, economically and politically in comparison to men.[12] As most of Lê's Pygmalion figures are white French men who try to 'mould' ethnic minority women, a term Frye employs to understand oppressive power relations, this thesis exposes how Lê portrays the Pygmalion paradigm as involved in the oppression of ethnic minority women because of the way they are racialised as well as gendered in France.[13]

With reference to Ahmed's analysis of how happiness functions discursively to oppressively direct those who are marked, this chapter explores how Pygmalion figures in the novels employ universalist discourses as chisels to mould these women by promising happiness in the shape of equality, freedom or acceptance through integration into French society.[14] Examining the intertextuality Lê creates with the Pygmalion myth therefore makes it possible to build upon

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Tracing, Erasing, and Re-Tracing Fragments of the Self in Writing', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies,* 18:4 (2014); Crystel Pinçonnat, 'Le complexe d'Antigone. Relectures féministes et postcoloniales du scénario Oedipien', *Revue de Littérature Comparée,* 4:344 (2012) <https://www.cairn.info/revue-de-litterature-comparee-2012-4-page-495.htm> [accessed 06/04/2020].

[9] Pinçonnat (2012), p.501.

[10] Whilst Ovid's statue is unnamed, this work will use the name Galatea, associated with the statue since the European Renaissance, for simplicity and to avoid re-enacting her objectification. See Kathleen McConnell, 'Creating People for Popular Consumption: Echoes of Pygmalion and 'The Rape of the Lock' in Artificial Intelligence', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:4 (2007), p.687.

[11] See Bacholle-Boŝković (2006), pp.71-72.

[12] Tracy Hallstead, *Pygmalion's Chisel: For Women Who Are "Never Good Enough"*, ProQuest Ebook Central edn, (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013) <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1220963.> [accessed 10/03/2020] pp.xiii-xiv.

[13] See Frye (1983), pp.4-5; Ahmed (2017), p.30.

[14] See Ahmed (2010).

previous research which has considered how the integration process for her exiled characters is complicated by discrimination or paternalism to reveal how integration discourses become one of the barriers to an egalitarian French society.[15] Additionally, it indicates how this intertextuality, along with other literary tools such as imagery, allegory, symbolic naming and open-endings, is used by Lê to both stimulate an intersectional feminist consciousness of the violence present within republican universalism and resist the inferiorising and essentialising power relations involved. In this vein, this chapter demonstrates how Lê's re-writing of a classical Western myth is central to her works' exposure and subversion of a contemporary mythology that presents French society as the upholder and guarantor of universalist ideals.

Whilst it is not within the scope of this thesis to examine Pygmalion intertextuality across all of Lê's works, this chapter focuses on the examples in which this is explored to its fullest, namely *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot*, to offer a model of the way in which this approach might be applied across Lê's oeuvre. The analysis is structured around the relationships that the niece and *Mortesaison* have with the individual ethnic majority men and employers in their lives. Examining these relationships separately draws out the differences between individual ethnic majority characters, whilst comparing and gaining an overview of them illuminates how they are all portrayed as Pygmalion figures who try to mould the ethnic minority female characters in order to perpetuate sex and race-based social hierarchies in France.

The niece is one of two Vietnamese protagonists exiled in France, along with her uncle, through whose perspective *Calomnies* is written. It begins with the niece's request that her uncle reveal the identity of her real father after an encounter with another immigrant makes her think about her origins. This triggers her uncle's reflections on the controlling and manipulative Vietnamese family who excluded him; his realisation that, in spite of his supposed integration in French society, he will never be accepted there; and his subsequent suicide. The niece's narrative focuses on her life in France rather than Vietnam and reveals how her interest in her father forms only one element of this young immigrant author's quest to discover and negotiate her own identity in relation to her origins, writing and French culture. She explores the many pressures and limiting conditions placed on her and her writing by the French men in her life and, by extension, French society generally because of her gender and origins. In particular, Lê depicts how these men use promises of equality, freedom or acceptance to justify and mask their controlling, paternalist, and often abusive and exploitative behaviour towards the niece to influence her path of integration. Through reflections on her previous romantic relationships and her current decisions about her origins and writing, the niece gains a greater awareness of the violence

[15] Dao (2012); Lay-Chenchabi and Do (2008); Selao (2014).

involved in this integration process and eventually tries to take her identity and direction into her own hands.[16] My analysis of *Calomnies* will focus on the niece's relationships with the four French men in order to highlight how they are all portrayed as Pygmalion-like figures and explore how the niece negotiates and resists their attempted moulding of her as an ethnic minority woman.

Les dits d'un idiot is narrated in an unpunctuated stream of consciousness by an unnamed French character who reflects on his dysfunctional relationship with his mother; specifically, how this arises from her disillusionment with life as an unappreciated housewife and may have triggered the paralysis that confines him to a wheelchair. The narrator also relates the experiences of his friend, a young Vietnamese immigrant whom he nicknames 'Mortesaison'. He gradually builds up a picture of her life and work in France, firstly, as a carer for the elderly Ragot and, secondly, as a writer for a charity satisfying the egos of former French celebrities. In both cases, the narrator illustrates how Ragot strictly controls her behaviour by insisting that she assimilate his cultural values, knowledge and practices and how her Maya Agency clients attempt to direct her writing. Like the niece, Mortesaison tries to negotiate her independence in relation to how others mould and direct her in French society. The second section on *Les dits d'un idiot* will consider Mortesaison's relationship with Ragot and the factors and mechanisms which reproduce unequal power relations between them and then turn to the challenges she faces as a writer at the Maya Agency. Ultimately, this chapter aims to unravel the novels' depictions of discrimination and inequality in French society and how they are perpetuated through republican universalism because of blind-spots, or even active rewritings, present in integration discourse and practices.

Pygmalion Figures and the Restrictive Directionality of Integration in *Calomnies*

Calomnies is narrated by the unnamed protagonists *la nièce* and *l'oncle* who, exiled from Vietnam, reflect on their experiences in French society. A simple encounter triggers the narrative: when a stranger from her homeland approaches and speaks to the niece in her mother-tongue she responds brusquely. Her later statement that she hates it when '*compatriotes*' assume a connection with her explains this hostility and indicates that she dissociates herself from her origins.[17] This corresponds with her behaviour throughout the novel which suggests that she sees

[16] Lê explains that Vietnam is the unspecified 'Pays' referenced in her novels preceding *Les Trois Parques* (1997): Alexandra Kurmann, 'An Interview with Linda Lê', (2010) <https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Centres/Linda_Le_Interview.pdf> [accessed 07/04/2020] (p.1).
[17] Lê (1993), p.20. Original emphasis.

herself as French rather than Vietnamese: she writes in French, voluntarily exiles herself from Vietnam and her Vietnamese family, and associates predominantly with members of the French ethnic majority.[18] However, her irritation with the stranger and fear that he and his large black dog are stalking her soon turns to fascination and she begins to spy on him, discovering he is a local shoemaker.[19] This infatuation engenders a renewed interest in her own origins and she writes to her estranged uncle to discover whether her real father is, as her mother alleges, an American officer who fought in the Vietnam War rather than her Vietnamese husband.[20] The niece's sudden obsession with her origins conveys how, as Tess Do argues, this encounter has 'shattered her French identity' and that she is, as a result, on a quest not just for the "father" but also the "fatherland" and, as such, a broader sense of belonging.[21]

The niece's desire for a sense of belonging and identity is accompanied by the wish for direction, as evidenced in her request to her uncle that he would 'lui indiquer le chemin'.[22] At the start of the novel, identity therefore appears to be caught up with influence and power relations. Indeed, if the shoemaker and her family are allegories for the Vietnamese nation-state's influence beyond its borders as Anh Thang Dao proposes, the niece's nightmares about the shoemaker stalking her reveal how her Vietnamese origins haunt and influence her in France.[23] Although the niece had managed, at least partially, to escape her family and its oppressive gender and social norms through her supposed integration in France and her pursuit of a writing career they disdain, her quest means that she risks becoming, as her uncle states, 'une poupée de chiffon entre leurs mains'.[24] The dangers of this are highlighted through the uncle's chapters as his niece's letter leads to his reflections on their domineering Vietnamese family and how it attempts to control its members or, failing this, exclude them.

Nevertheless, the niece's narrative focuses on the men in her life, who are all French with the exception of the shoemaker, and conveys, through imagery and allegory, how they direct her in the same way as Pygmalion moulds Galatea. Through intertextuality with the Pygmalion myth Lê explores how the niece's desire for belonging and equality through integration in France is exploited by the ethnic majority characters. Although these men do not use the kinds of racial

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[18] Ibid. p.12.
[19] Ibid. pp.14, 15.
[20] His identity is revealed through references to his role during the war, including shouting orders to kill, and how he abandoned his Vietnamese lover when the war ended: ibid. p.55.
[21] Tess Do, 'From Incest to Exile: Linda Lê and the Incestuous Vietnamese Immigrants', in *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations,* ed. by Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee (Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), p.188.
[22] Lê (1993), pp.12, 104.
[23] Dao (2012), p.731.
[24] Lê (1993), p.10; Dao (2012), p.727. The doll/puppet is a recurring motif throughout Lê's oeuvre which highlights how (ethnic minority) women are manipulated by others.

slurs directed against the uncle, such as 'Face-de-Singe' or 'le Chinetoqué', the path of integration on which they guide her is shaped by their intersecting racism and sexism.[25] The following sections reveal how, on her quest, the niece negotiates the immobilising and silencing Pygmalion-like discourses each of these men employs and, in the end, gains an intersectional feminist consciousness of this process which allows her to seek out a sense of identity that resists French and Vietnamese racialised and gendered social norms. As such, they highlight how Lê exposes and challenges the inequalities linked to racism and sexism in French society, and the sexism present in the original Pygmalion tale, by re-writing this myth from the perspective of an ethnic minority female Galatea in contemporary France.

Bellemort's Oppressive Path to Freedom

The earliest relationship upon which the niece reflects is with an older man, whom she nicknames Bellemort and Ricin describes as 'Pygmalion', and begins shortly after her arrival in France when she is only eighteen.[26] Knowing that the niece wishes to escape her origins and her controlling family, this misanthropist author promises to teach her how to become independent and free her from societal norms, including those in France.[27] This creates a teacher/pupil dynamic similar to the one present in Bernard Shaw's adaptation of the Pygmalion myth in his eponymous play. The protagonist Henry Higgins, a phonetician, sets himself the challenge of transforming what he perceives as the vulgar accent, conversation and appearance of Eliza Doolittle, a cockney flower-girl, to make her pass as an upper-class English lady. Likewise, Bellemort positions himself as the Pygmalion 'maître' with the niece as his 'disciple' and proposes an 'éducation antisentimentale' to chisel away at her feminine sentimentality.[28]

Bellemort argues that this is necessary because sentimentality, including the belief in love, leads women into a 'placard conjugal' and leaves them 'au ventre lourd d'amertume'.[29] This comparison of marriage to a prison-like cupboard resembles Frye's description of oppression as she returns to the root of the term, press, to reveal how it functions: 'Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize.

[25] Lê (1993), p.17. By merging the racist phrase 'chinetoque' and the term 'toqué', slang for mad, Lê highlights how the uncle is othered for his supposed madness as well as his ethnic origins.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid. pp.61-62.
[28] Ibid. p.61; This 'éducation antisentimentale' can be seen as an ironic reference to Gustave Flaubert's novel 'L'Éducation sentimentale', which Linda Lê identifies as one of her favourite works in Loucif (2007).
[29] Lê (1993), p.62.

Reduce'.[30] Through this imagery, Bellemort therefore represents the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage and the female domesticity it encourages as constituting an immobilising set of barriers for women in French society.[31] Sara Ahmed argues that the heterosexual 'fairy-tale' of love, marriage and reproduction directs and restricts women's lives because it remains the main narrative for female happiness.[32] Likewise, Bellemort denounces this narrative by suggesting that it fills women's wombs with resentment rather than joy.

Bellemort therefore proposes his 'éducation antisentimentale', and the nihilist philosophy upon which this is based, as a form of nonconformism. The critical consciousness it supposedly affords should illuminate the functioning and impact of such norms and, subsequently, emancipate and reorient the niece away from the oppressive path set for her as an ethnic minority woman.[33] Through his moulding education he therefore appears to promise both freedom and equality to the niece. Indeed, Bellemort depicts himself as the saviour rescuing the niece from French societal norms as though she were, as Ricin states, 'une sirène déchiquetée qui nage à contre-courant'.[34] Ahmed uses the similar image of the flow of a crowd to symbolise how norms create momentum that directs our lives. This flow and momentum mean that 'the crowd becomes directive' and, on the one hand, that one can be carried along with the crowd without noticing these norms and how they function.[35] On the other hand, one will feel resistance against any attempt to escape or counter that flow: 'you would then experience that flow as a tangible thing: what stops you from stopping; what slows you down'.[36] In this vein, the siren metaphor characterises French heteropatriarchal norms as a strong tide that batters the siren against dangerous rocks when she comes too close to land, the domain of man, and acts as a force that impedes her escape. Bellemort thus presents the practices and discourses of love, marriage and reproduction as driving the niece into harmful situations and as a relentless pressure that will wear down her resistance until she accepts and is directed by these norms. The fact that this siren is drawn away from the sea towards land paints this process as unnatural and Bellemort's education of her as succour to resist the tide of sentimentality and reach freedom in open water where she belongs.

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[30] Frye (1983), p.2.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ahmed (2017), p.49.
[33] See ibid. p.43.
[34] Lê (1993), p.62. The siren is another mythological figure that appears in relation to (ethnic minority) women throughout Lê's oeuvre which deserves more in-depth analysis than this exploration of the Pygmalion myth allows.
[35] Ahmed (2017), pp.43, 45.
[36] Ibid. p.45.

Nonetheless, as his symbolic name suggests, Bellemort's attitude towards the niece is more ambivalent than his ostensibly progressive or even feminist promises to emancipate her suggest. Bellemort's novels reveal his misogyny as he paints women as '*un animal tour à tour docile et capricieux*' who seduce men and then unscrupulously abandon them.[37] This comparison of women to animals illustrates how Bellemort dehumanises and inferiorises them, regardless of whether they are 'tameable' or not. Further, the way he levels women and denies their individuality signifies that he marks them with gender difference and identifies sentimentality, supposedly manifested in both docility and capriciousness, as its defining negative characteristic.

Yet references to Bellemort's idealised 'amour de jeunesse' who left him belie his supposed immunity to such emotions.[38] Instead, his monomania appears to be an attempt to deny his own emotional vulnerability by typifying love as a feminine trait. Frye identifies such discourse as common in gender oppression and states that, although it requires emotional restraint from men, it forms 'part of a system that benefits men overall' by allowing them to conceive themselves as superior to women.[39] Bellemort's thoughts and behaviour reveal that his lover broke his heart and suggest that, to simultaneously account for this and mask his vulnerability, he conceives himself as superior by depicting all women as inherently temperamental and, therefore, inferior and abhorrent. As his desire to educate the niece arises from this attitude, he resembles Pygmalion in Ovid's myth who is motivated by his hatred of women to create the ideal woman in sculpture form.[40] In the case of this modern Pygmalion, this misogyny manifests itself in his attempts to chisel away at the niece's sentimentality and, as such, her gender difference. The fact that Bellemort does this with many women and so produces 'des Galatée en série' reveals how his attempts to mould them towards his image of the ideal woman is based on his erasure of their individuality.[41] This idea also locates the niece's experiences within a larger picture in a way suggestive of Ahmed's description of the path as 'a trace of past journeys'.[42] Furthering her reflections on how a crowd acquires momentum and becomes directive, she explains that 'a path can be made by the repetition of "being trodden" upon' and, subsequently, becomes easier to follow and harder to leave by being well-trodden.[43] Similarly, it is easier for Bellemort to direct the niece's behaviour and harder for her to resist because he has already done so with other women.

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[37] Lê (1993), pp.60, 61.
[38] Ibid. p.61.
[39] Frye (1983), p.15.
[40] See Paula James, *Ovid's Myth of Pygmalion on Screen: In Pursuit of the Perfect Woman*, (London: Continuum, 2011), p.13.
[41] Lê (1993), p.62.
[42] Ahmed (2017), p.46.
[43] Ibid. p.45.

Whilst Ricin highlights this misogyny, an intersectional reading of the novel unveils how Bellemort's moulding of the niece also relates to how he marks her because of her origins. The image of Bellemort as the siren's saviour is echoed in another scene where the French rescue refugees who appear off France's coast on fragile boats to escape communism.[44] The impetus of French aid to the refugees is to furnish them with a positive image of themselves as charitable saviours, a point evidenced by their loss of interest in the refugees' suffering once this desire has been satiated. Lê's use of mirroring between this scene and Bellemort's rescue of the 'sirène déchiquetée' through his 'éducation antisentimentale' indicates, firstly, that Bellemort educates the niece to boost his own ego and sense of superiority.[45] Secondly, it exposes how this Pygmalion-like moulding is linked to the dual difference with which Bellemort marks the niece, symbolised in the siren's bi-partite body, because of her origins as well as her sex. This is exemplified in a list of Bellemort's practices that the niece adopts: 'tu lis ce qu'il a toujours lu, tu manges ce qu'il a toujours mangé'.[46] As the niece has only recently arrived in France at this point, this appears like an example of the cultural assimilation by which Dao argues the niece is influenced.[47] In this vein, Bellemort promotes her adoption of not only his philosophical values but also his cultural practices, presented as longstanding and consequently legitimate through the repetition of 'toujours', as the means to obtain the freedom and equality he promises her. This process therefore resonates with republican universalist promises to immigrants and ethnic minorities that they can attain freedom and equality in French society through integration, often construed as cultural assimilation.[48]

Bellemort's behaviour and attitude towards the niece throughout this moulding-integration process are characterised by paternalism as he condescendingly treats her as a 'jeune fille' who needs to be educated and, like an animal, 'tamed'.[49] The way he employs this dehumanising argument to justify her assimilation of his philosophy and culture is reminiscent of how, as Ahmed notes, Western patriarchal empires like France inferiorised not only women but also the colonised as children or even subhuman creatures who needed to be civilised through education, disciplining or both.[50] The 'mission civilisatrice' was presented as a means to enlighten the infantilised subjects of the French empire by inculcating in them the allegedly superior

[44] Lê (1993), p.43.
[45] Ibid. p.62.
[46] Ibid. p.71.
[47] Dao (2012), p.732.
[48] For an analysis of how integration is often interpreted as a form of assimilation, in spite of statements to the contrary, see d'Appolonia (2009); Jennings (2000).
[49] Lê (1993), pp.60, 71.
[50] Ahmed (2017), p.80.

universal values and cultural norms of the Republic.[51] Pascal Blanchard argues that modern-day integration discourses about educating or even civilising ethnic minorities, particularly in the *banlieues*, re-enact this imperialist 'mission civilisatrice' on French soil.[52] He demonstrates how assumptions about the superiority of French norms and universalist values have led to assimilationist policies that not only inferiorise other cultures and ethnic minorities but also reinforce inequalities. Similarly, Bellemort's education of the niece, which involves her not only restraining her sentimentality but also assimilating his cultural practices and beliefs, inferiorises both her and her culture and reinforces a power dynamic similar to that of the coloniser and colonised. As such, Lê's depiction of Bellemort's relationship with the niece hints that this female immigrant's experiences of integration in modern France constitute a trace of previous, intersecting journeys from the country's imperialist and patriarchal past.[53] Lê's work therefore challenges the narrative promoted by institutions such as the *Haut Conseil à l'intégration* that denies the assimilationist tendencies of many integration discourses and practices and, consequently, any continuities with colonialism.[54] Furthermore, by exploring how this is justified through universalist discourses on integration, based on ethnocentric assumptions about the superiority of French values and traditions, it highlights how discrimination can be reproduced through republican universalism.

The connection between Bellemort's Pygmalion-like moulding of the niece and an inegalitarian integration process is emphasised further in Ricin's statement about the niece: 'En amour, tu t'es toujours portée comme une exilée qui espère remplir toutes les conditions nécessaires pour postuler à l'emploi d'immigrée modèle'.[55] The niece's relationships thus become box-ticking integration exercises in which she allows her partners to mould her towards their rigid images of the perfect ethnic minority Galatea to please and therefore be accepted by them. Although it is based on his nihilism, Bellemort's promise of emancipation mirrors republican integration discourses in various ways and facilitates a moulding process which erodes the gender and ethnic differences for which he inferiorises the niece. This erasure reveals the complex and potentially ambiguous nature of this integration process because it does not always involve, as Julie Assier suggests, the niece's commodification as 'un objet exotique'.[56] Furthermore, just as Dao has demonstrated the assimilation process increases the French nation's influence over

[51] See 'Unveiling the Violence of Republican Universalist Discourses' in the Introduction and Hargreaves (2007).
[52] Blanchard (2000), p.5.
[53] Lê (1993), pp.60, 71.
[54] In relation to the denial of the historical links between republican universalism and colonial assimilation policy see Blanchard (2000); Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991).
[55] Lê (1993), p.71.
[56] Julie Assier, 'Les Migrances du moi « Calomnies »', *Francofonia,* 58 (2010), p.37.

immigrants in the novel, Bellemort gains greater control of the niece as he moulds her to his own design.[57] Indeed, his success in 'taming' rather than liberating her through an intersectional Pygmalion integration process, evidenced by her desire to please him, exposes how his universalist promises facilitate his domination of her, as was previously the case through the *mission civilisatrice* in the colonies from which her family originates. Through intertextuality with the Pygmalion myth, Linda Lê therefore explores the legacy of France's colonial past and the assimilatory *mission civilisatrice* in modern-day universalist integration processes that perpetuate the oppression rather than emancipation of postcolonial immigrants in the former metropole.

The oppressive rather than liberating nature of Pygmalion's intersectional integration and moulding process for the niece is emphasised in the statement that Bellemort 'l'enferme', like the restrictive marriages and motherhood from which his tutelage is supposed to free her.[58] Rather than physical, this imprisonment is social, mental and emotional as, by making her assimilate his ideas, he aims to make her into one of his Galateas 'qui ne parlent ni ne pensent ni ne sourient'.[59] In a reversal of Galatea's metamorphosis in the Pygmalion myth, Bellemort wants to petrify the niece into silence and immobility. This can be linked to the original figure called Galatea in classical mythology: a nymph goddess of calm seas whose name translates as 'calm-goddess'.[60] Like calm water that remains still and silent unless someone or something touches or moves it, Bellemort discourages the niece from thinking, speaking or feeling independently. Tracy Hallstead notes that, even in human form, Ovid's Galatea 'has no purpose or spirit of her own but is merely a reflection of [Pygmalion], an object created by him and for his glory, not a subject with an individual will'.[61] Similarly, Ahmed argues that women and ethnic minorities from Europe's former colonies continue to be depicted as children to not only to justify directing them according to Western patriarchal norms but also imply that they are 'not supposed to have a will of their own' and, instead, 'must be willing to obey'.[62] The perfect ethnic minority Galatea is therefore one who sacrifices her own will to Pygmalion's. Thus this white French man uses the promise to liberate the niece from gender norms and her origins as a disciplinary moulding tool to restrict her every thought, act and emotion. Through her reversal of the metamorphosis in the Pygmalion myth and symbolic naming of Bellemort, Lê exposes how, this Pygmalion's transformation of the niece into

[57] See Dao (2012).
[58] See Lê (1993), p.62.
[59] Ibid. p.61.
[60] 'Galatea', *Theoi Greek Mythology* (2017) <https://www.theoi.com/Pontios/NereisGalateia.html> [accessed 13/05/2020]; McConnell (2007), p.687.
[61] Hallstead (2013), pp.2-3.
[62] Ahmed (2017), p.80.

his gendered and racialised ideal of an ethnic minority Galatea simultaneously, and intentionally, drains her of her vitality.[63]

Moreover, deterring the niece from thinking independently or critically reinforces Bellemort's control over her by fostering a significant oppressive tool: internalisation. Frye describes how restrictions become 'self-monitored' by the oppressed and constitute 'adaptations to the requirements and expectations imposed by the needs and tastes and tyrannies of others'.[64] This conveys how the oppressed can become complicit in the reproduction of social inequalities through self-monitoring. Similarly, Lê describes how Bellemort's education of the niece leads to her self-monitoring: 'Elle discipline sa nature, garrotte ses élans'.[65] The violence of disciplining and garrotting evokes how the niece has internalised Bellemort's hatred of her femininity and origins and accordingly attempts to restrain the behaviours which he deems inferior. Further, this vocabulary stresses the oppressive nature of this process as, like a press that reduces something by squeezing out any gases or liquids within it, it is meant to force any sentimentality out of her.[66] Lê's depiction thus illustrates how internalisation is a product of, in Karen Pyke's words, the 'reproductive and recuperative tendencies of domination' as the self-monitoring to which it leads means that the niece becomes complicit in her own oppression.[67]

This internalisation continues to affect the niece even after her relationship with Bellemort has ended as, from information in the niece's letter, her uncle explains that 'elle a discipliné sa mémoire' in relation to her family.[68] The repeated phraseology of disciplining her nature and memory emphasises the link between these two examples as Bellemort's inferiorisation of her origins as well as gender leads her to repress not only any ethnic differences through cultural assimilation but also memories of her family. The negative impact of this internalised oppression and integration process is visible firstly in her hostility towards the shoemaker, as he reminds her of the ethnic difference she loathes in herself and, secondly, in how she is subsequently overwhelmed by this difference, evidenced in her obsession with the shoemaker. These forms of repression do not free the niece from her origins and femininity as Bellemort promises but create a schism within her, a point illustrated by the statement that the moulding process has transformed the niece into Bellemort's 'poupée schizophrène'.[69] Firstly, the 'poupée' is a recurring motif in Linda Lê's works that symbolises how women in particular are

[63] Lê (1993), p.62.
[64] Frye (1983), p.14.
[65] Lê (1993), p.62.
[66] Frye (1983), p.2.
[67] Karen Pyke, 'What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It?', *Sociological Perspectives,* 53:4 (2010), p.561.
[68] Lê (1993), p.105.
[69] Ibid. pp.61, 71.

manipulated or abused by others.[70] Secondly, the reference to schizophrenia conveys how the internalisation of Bellemort's nihilism has either distorted the niece's sense of reality and/or created a damaging disjuncture between her attitudes and emotions. Nancy Huston argues that the nihilist rejection of 'la chair mère' leads Lê's female characters to hate their own bodies and, consequently, to the sensation that they are split in two.[71] Her comment about the author's own nihilist tendencies when she began writing could also be applied to the niece: 'Si elle opte en faveur du néant, elle est menacée de folie'.[72] In light of the intersectional power relations already identified, we can expand upon Huston's conclusion to state that Bellemort's proselytization of the niece to his hatred of her racialised and gendered body drives her to madness. Moreover, the marriage of the 'poupée' motif and the niece's literal or metaphorical schizophrenia expresses how this madness that distorts the niece's sense of reality reinforces Bellemort's control over her. Indeed, misleading her into thinking that she must overcome essentialised and inferiorised gender and ethnic differences to attain liberty and equality in French society allows Bellemort to sculpt her into a submissive Galatea who, in spite of its negative consequences for her mental health, reproduces this social hierarchy. Lê further underlines the exploitative and toxic nature of this process as Ricin states that Bellemort has intentionally 'martyrisé' the niece in this way to use her suffering as inspiration for his own writing.[73]

The extent to which the niece's internalisation of Bellemort's ideas reinforces his power over her is evident in her attempt to rebel against his abusive and exploitative behaviour by becoming an author herself.[74] Whilst this may appear to break the silence he has imposed on her, it is not entirely subversive: 'Le duplicata parle, mais il ne fait que reproduire les pensées du maître'.[75] As a Galatea doll who cannot think or speak independently, she remains silenced in her writing because she regurgitates his ideas and remains on the path on which he has set her. Similarly, Huston argues that Lê, as an author, fails to overcome nihilism and the self-rejection this leads to for women in her first three novels.[76] Lê removed these works from her bibliography because she realised that they were 'des essais de voix' in which she tries to demonstrate that her work and her use of the French language are 'à la hauteur des indigènes'.[77] The overlap between Huston's analysis and Lê's conclusions about her first novels reveals how internalised racism and

[70] For example, it appears explicitly in *Les dits d'un idiot*, *Les aubes* and 'Voix off'.
[71] Huston (2004), p.326.
[72] Ibid. pp.327-28.
[73] Lê (1993), p.61.
[74] Ibid. p.71.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Huston (2004), p.303. These are: *Un si tendre vampire* (1986), *Fuir* (1987) and *Solo* (1988).
[77] Catherine Argand, 'Linda Lê', *L'Express,* (1999) <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/linda-le_803102.html> [accessed 09/05/2020].

sexism coalesce to restrict Lê and the niece's writing. These ethnic minority women initially struggle to find their own voices because they measure themselves against the hierarchised standards set by ethnic majority French men or society. Their wish to prove themselves as an 'exception to the rule' as the model female immigrant means that they write like, as Lê states about herself, 'un apprenti écrivain encore trop timoré'.[78] In turn, this reinforces the 'rule' constructed through unequal power relations and therefore cannot subvert such discourses.

Furthermore, Lê reveals that this approach dooms the niece to failure because the way Bellemort marks her as intrinsically flawed because of her gender and origins means that she will never reach perfection or even equal status in Bellemort's eyes. Indeed, Bellemort moulds women 'pour mieux les haïr': whether they submit to him or leave him as the niece eventually does, he can accuse them of the supposedly feminine and negative traits of docility or capriciousness to reinforce his sense of superiority.[79] Lê's depiction thus reflects Hallstead argument that this is an essential element of patriarchal oppression because, to maintain his power over Galatea, Pygmalion 'must forever remain her critic and sculptor'.[80] In *Calomnies*, this is facilitated through the way in which the promise of freedom through integration which justifies the moulding process is constantly deferred: the hope that she will gain freedom and equality through her assimilation of Bellemort's beliefs and practices means that, for a long time, she accepts an oppressive teacher/pupil dynamic incompatible with these ideals. Ahmed explains that happiness in its various manifestations, such as justice or freedom, remains directive '*through its failure to be actualised in the present*'.[81] Bellemort's never-ending moulding-integration of the niece elucidates how an unattainable racialised ideal image of women and a yet-to-be-realised freedom become disciplinary mechanisms to maintain his power over the niece.

By illuminating how this Pygmalion figure takes advantage of a young ethnic minority woman whose desire to escape her origins makes her particularly vulnerable, Lê finds the voice that eluded her in earlier novels. Through intertextuality, imagery, mirroring and symbolic naming, she highlights the hypocrisy, violence, racism and sexism veiled within Bellemort's nihilist ideas and the republican integration discourses they often resemble. In turn, Lê demonstrates how these discourses and the power relations involved are employed in a modern-day *mission civilisatrice* to direct the niece on oppressive paths by moulding her into a silent and immobilised Galatea whose will is subjugated to that of others. Finally, her depiction of the negative impact of Bellemort's behaviour on the niece and the challenges of resistance as a result of internalisation

[78] Loucif (2007).
[79] Lê (1993), p.61.
[80] Hallstead (2013), pp.3-4.
[81] Ahmed (2004), p.197. Original emphasis.

reject a reductive resistance/complicity binary to convey their simultaneity.[82] However, the narrative also offers hope as the niece has left Bellemort by the time it begins and her reflections upon his behaviour help her to make sense of subsequent relationships.

Weidman, *Le Conseiller* and Treacherous Promises of Happiness

Although Bellemort alone is labelled Pygmalion in the novel, Linda Lê portrays how other white male characters, including the niece's former lover Weidman and her publisher, try to mould the protagonist in relation to their racist and sexist attitudes towards ethnic minority women. This section demonstrates how, whilst they do not engage in the same assimilatory *mission civilisatrice* as Bellemort, Weidman and *Le Conseiller* mobilise the concept of integration alongside promises of happiness and acceptance as intersectional moulding tools to inferiorise and oppressively direct this Galatea and her writing in French society.

Having realised the manipulative and abusive nature of Bellemort's behaviour, the niece leaves him for a head-hunter named Weidman. As he does not dismiss the idea of love or try to indoctrinate her, she believes that he is 'un homme qui se proposera de l'aimer sans ambitionner de devenir son éducateur', and that, consequently, he can offer her '[s]a part de bonheur'.[83] Whereas Bellemort had 'tamed' the niece, the fact that Weidman supposedly remains 'une terre étrangère' to her as she tries to be a model immigrant suggests that integration in his eyes is not dependent upon the erasure of ethnic differences through cultural assimilation.[84] Yet Weidman's desire for the niece to be his 'poupée épouse' indicates that, although this relationship is supposed to make the niece happy, his image of the ideal ethnic minority woman aligns with oppressive gender norms.[85] In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed outlines the restrictive directionality and conditionality of happiness when those most privileged in society 'define the conditions of happiness' for minorities in order to mould their behaviour.[86] She argues that marriage and integration are constructed by white men as conditions of happiness for ethnic minority women which encourage the latter to align their happiness and, therefore, behaviour with practices that reproduce the privilege and happiness of the former.[87] Further, as 'a form of pressure [that] does not always feel harsh', happiness is a relatively inconspicuous and highly

[82] Pyke warns against perpetuating this false dichotomy in research into internalisation as it can itself function as one of the reproductive tendencies of unequal power relations. See Pyke (2010), p.564.
[83] Lê (1993), p.62.
[84] Ibid. p.71.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ahmed (2010), p.133.
[87] Ibid. See Chapters 2 & 4.

effective directing tool.[88] The directionality of the happiness promised by Weidman is reflected in the way the niece's desires become 'dociles' and subjugated to those of her lover: for example, she wishes to listen to music exactly when he does and wears bright skirts reflecting his optimism and emphasising her exotic femininity.[89] The niece's alignment of her happiness with that of a white French man makes his happiness the main condition for her own as an ethnic minority woman. It therefore becomes part of the box-ticking exercise by which she tries to become the model female migrant who achieves fulfilment through his love and acceptance of her. This suggests she has internalised the normative discourses her partner espouses around marriage and integration without him having to overtly 'educate' her. Thus, like the siren caught in the flow of the tide, the niece does not recognise how behaviour is being directed by gendered and racialised discourses. In fact, the constantly deferred promise of happiness means she does not resist the flow in a way that would make these norms tangible as a persistent oppressive force in French society.[90]

However, the way Ricin suggests the niece 'jouai[t] la poupée optimiste' indicates that her happiness is performative and that she believes, like Weidman, that she ought to be made happy by pleasing this white man. This is redolent of the 'happiness duty' that Ahmed argues is imposed on the oppressed. She explains that the directionality of the happiness promise is reinforced through the expectation that the oppressed will only speak about what is good and never 'speak from or out of unhappiness'.[91] Weidman's professed love and acceptance of the niece therefore translate to the duty not only to please him but to do so cheerfully. By discouraging the niece from expressing or exploring the reasons for her failure to be made happy, this duty mystifies and so facilitates the perpetuation of an oppressive system which immobilises and silences her.

Furthermore, as with Bellemort's promise of freedom, the niece learns that Weidman's expressions of love and promises of acceptance and happiness through non-assimilatory integration mask a violent attitude towards her. In a room that Weidman names 'la chambre de Barbe-Bleue', she discovers her lover's notebook: 'Ce que contient le cahier, je suis incapable de le restituer de manière cohérente à Ricin. Je ne cesse de lui répéter, *Dans ce journal, Weidman me fait la peau*'.[92] The niece's inability to coherently express what Weidman has written about her conveys both the violence of his words and their negative and traumatic impact on the niece when she realises he does not love her. The intertextuality with Bluebeard's room links this to the

[88] Ahmed (2017), p.49.
[89] See Ahmed (2010), p.43; Lê (1993), pp.71, 91.
[90] Ahmed (2017), p.45.
[91] Ahmed (2010), p.158.
[92] Lê (1993), p.74. Original emphasis.

discovery by Bluebeard's new young bride of the bloodied bodies of his previous wives whom he has murdered and kept in a forbidden room. This comparison indicates that Weidman's hatred is directed, like Bluebeard, against women generally and that the niece is following in the footsteps of other women who were oppressed and abused by Weidman before her. The imagery of him flaying her alive in his notebook also unveils the symbolic violence present in his attitude and behaviour towards her. Just as flaying involves the gradual removal of a person's skin, so Weidman keeps finding flaws in the niece to relentlessly chisel away at. In this way, the promise of love is deferred and the integration process is never-ending because this misogynist white Pygmalion figure will constantly find fault in this ethnic minority woman.

As Weidman views the niece with the same contempt and sense of superiority as Bellemort, his concerns for her happiness are also revealed as deceptive. Instead, his role as a head-hunter and the fact that Weidman can mean 'hunting' reveal that he takes pleasure in capturing this ethnic minority woman, with her ethnic and gender differences intact, as a trophy of his superiority.[93] Weidman's behaviour and the racist and sexist normative discourses he espouses thus conform to an oppressive Pygmalion paradigm: although he offers the niece the hope of being loved and accepted as an equal in France in spite of her gender and origins, he uses this promise to make the niece surrender her will to his moulding. In turn, encouraging her to submit to an oppressive integration process reinforces both his sense of superiority as a white French man and the power relations that privilege him in French society. Further, although the niece gains awareness of how he is playing 'double jeu', Lê lays bare the challenges of escaping his and society's moulding-integration as the niece's first form of resistance involves brooding privately and neglecting her writing.[94] This resistance is entangled with complicity because, by neither confronting nor leaving him, she mimics the happiness duty and so reinforces her silence and immobility. In this vein, Lê portrays how the ability to subvert unequal power relations requires an awareness not just of Weidman's 'trahison' through hollow promises but also how the oppressed are made to reproduce such power relations.[95]

Although Weidman's image of the perfect ethnic minority woman differs from Bellemort's, analysing the intertextuality Lê creates with the Pygmalion myth reveals the superficiality of these divergences. They both attempt to appropriate her for the benefit not only of their writing, as Warren Motte argues, but also for their own egos as their inferiorisation and attempted subjugation of the niece because of her gender and ethnicity feeds their sense of

[93] House of Names, 'Weidman History, Family Crest & Coats of Arms', *House of Names,* (23/09/2010) <https://www.houseofnames.com/weidman-family-crest> [accessed 18/05/2020].
[94] Lê (1993), pp.72, 75.
[95] Ibid. p.72.

superiority.[96] Through this mirroring, Lê highlights how the niece's experiences with Bellemort and Weidman form part of a larger picture: an ethnocentric patriarchal society that oppresses ethnic minority women. Whether these men encourage the niece to promote the differences she supposedly embodies or erase them through her assimilation of French normative practices, they use this process to mould her towards silence and immobility within their relationship and thereby deny her the rights of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* integral to republican universalism. This occurs not just in spite of but through discourses and promises of equality, freedom and happiness which simultaneously encourage the niece to seek the approval of these white men to integrate into French society and mask the oppression this facilitates.[97] The challenges of evading this Pygmalion paradigm in French society are conveyed by Ricin's description of the niece swapping Bellemort for Weidman: 'Au lieu de chercher ton propre chemin, tu prends une correspondance, tu montes dans un autre train en marche'.[98] In leaving Bellemort for Weidman the niece is caught on the same kind of path because she is still being directed and subjugated.[99] The prevalence of racism and sexism within French society and its discourses of integration and universalism, and the niece's internalisation of the quest for approval these foster, means that even her attempts at resistance and moving on can form part of her immobility in France.

In contrast to the previous two examples, the niece's relationship with her publisher, whom she nicknames *Le Conseiller*, progresses with the narrative rather than as reflections on the past. The narration focuses on his influence over her writing as he proposes that, for her next project, she should write about her father and origins as part of series entitled '*L'Amour de leur vie*'.[100] He therefore, like Weidman, does not call for the niece to erase and deny her foreign origins. *Le Conseiller* expresses the desire to free the niece from Ricin's pernicious nihilist influence and suggests that it would be 'salutaire' for her to focus on something joyful in her writing and return to Vietnam with the profits.[101] Although the niece begins to believe in *Le Conseiller*'s promise of happiness, his subsequent advice reveals that this is not his only concern: 'Vous avez assez abusé de la tristesse. […] Écrivez des exercices de jubilation. Cessez de vous calomnier, de *nous* calomnier'.[102] As Frye notes, the requirement for the oppressed to be cheerful, firstly, signals their 'docility' and 'acquiescence' with the inequalities they face and,

[96] Warren Motte, 'Linda Lê's Language', in *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction since 1990,* ed. by Warren Motte (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p.69.
[97] Ahmed (2017), p.43.
[98] Lê (1993), p.71.
[99] See Ahmed (2017).
[100] Lê (1993), pp.134, 31.
[101] Ibid. p.31.
[102] Ibid. Original emphasis.

secondly, erases the traces of their oppression.[103] *Le Conseiller*'s instruction exemplifies this happiness duty because his insistence that the niece be happy portrays her sorrow as unjustified. As the niece takes pride in her voluntary exile from her family and homeland in her letters to her uncle, the sadness of which her publisher speaks likely arises from her experiences in France, including the abusive relationships with Bellemort and Weidman. The depiction of the niece's sadness as gratuitous therefore denies the challenges of exile and the oppression she faces in France.[104]

Furthermore, *Le Conseiller*'s statement, 'Cessez de vous calomnier, de *nous* calomnier', portrays the niece's sorrow and its expression in her writing as slanderous to him as a member of an unspecified group from which he excludes her, as demonstrated by his opposition of 'vous' and 'nous'. There are two examples linked to the publisher's behaviour which illuminate with whom *Le Conseiller* aligns his identity in opposition to the niece's.[105] Ricin's comparison of *Le Conseiller*'s behaviour to the French preying on refugee victims suggests that the latter identifies with the French nation as 'sauveurs' of vulnerable refugees, who are essentialised and excluded from the national 'we'.[106] Earlier in the novel, Ricin also outlines *Le Conseiller*'s desire to make the niece 'passer pour sa protégée - l'écrivain originaire des anciennes colonies, le petit oiseau affamé, la jeune femme fragile qu'il parraine'.[107] This description and the previous analogy reveal how *Le Conseiller* evidences the kind of racist paternalism that inferiorises postcolonial immigrants which Lê, in later works, explicitly associates with those who espouse a hypocritical and exclusionary republican universalism.[108]

The second example is linked to the niece's development of a feminist consciousness of the Pygmalion moulding process in French society as she highlights how her publisher makes his secretary, Mademoiselle Monnier, into his Galatea-like protégée. She notes how he tries to 'déguiser la réalité', not only of her appearance but also his failed love life, by moulding her into his idealised image of blond-haired, blue-eyed femininity by telling her how to dress, dye her hair, do her make-up and talk.[109] In spite of the success of this transformation, however, *Le Conseiller* continues to view Mlle Monnier with a mixture of condescension, entitlement and 'du mépris pour celle qui s'était ainsi laisser façonner'.[110] His disdain towards his secretary, reinforced through her internalisation of the sexist discourses that facilitate his moulding of her, is fatally

[103] Frye (1983), p.2.
[104] Ahmed (2010), p.158.
[105] Lê (1993), p.37.
[106] Ibid. p.176.
[107] Ibid. p.37.
[108] Ibid. See analysis of *Je ne répondrai plus jamais de rien* in Chapter One.
[109] Ibid. pp.123, 24.
[110] Ibid. p.125.

enacted in his murder of her before his suicide after his publishing company goes bankrupt.[111] This link to the Bernard Shaw's adaptation of the Pygmalion myth and Bellemort's behaviour indicates, firstly, how *Le Conseiller*'s desire to make the niece his 'protegée' is another manifestation of Pygmalion moulding in French society. Secondly, it conveys how this moulding involves an intersecting inferiorisation of her gender and origins which allows him to align himself with a supposedly superior white French masculinity.

Le Conseiller's Pygmalion-like 'parrainage' of the niece is 'enrichissante' in the way that it bolsters his sense of superiority not only as French and white, as Isabelle Favre notes, but also as male.[112] Additionally, Warren Motte notes that such targeted promotion of the 'powerless' as 'Francophone writers' or 'women writers' is concerned less with equality than putting 'the full pageant of power on public display'.[113] In other words, by moulding and promoting the niece as the model female immigrant author, *Le Conseiller* reinforces rather than challenges intersecting social hierarchies in French society. *Le Conseiller*'s accusation that the niece's writing is slander against him exemplifies this intersectional power dynamic: as her sorrow rather than joy-filled writing does not reflect the positive image of white French men he wishes to create, he calls on her to docilely accept and be content with how he and French patriarchal society treat her as an ethnic minority woman. His influence is evident as the niece writes a first draft of the piece he demands and considers following his advice: 'Je devrais peut-être le remettre au Conseiller et rentrer au Pays'.[114] In this vein, *Le Conseiller* uses happiness as 'a form of pressure' to restrictively direct the niece's thoughts and writing whilst masking how these silencing and immobilising restrictions arise from and perpetuate intersectional discrimination and inequality.[115]

The *Conseiller*'s statement that the niece will write this piece '[s]ous ma dictée, si nécessaire' draws attention to the silencing involved: just as Bellemort speaks through the niece because she has internalised his ideas, *Le Conseiller* expects her to express his thoughts.[116] Echoes of this can be seen in Bernard Rapp's statement during a televised interview with Linda Lê on his programme '*Caractères*', that 'one should not rely on her apparent innocence, she has ideas of her own'.[117] The paternalism towards Lê as the oriental 'other' which Leakthina Ollier identifies here and throughout the interview depicts the originality of Lê's work and ideas as exceptional in

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[111] See ibid. pp.125; 45-6.
[112] Favre (2018), p.128.
[113] Motte (2003), p.60.
[114] Lê (1993), p.32.
[115] Ahmed (2017), p.49.
[116] Lê (1993), p.134.
[117] Quoted Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, 'Consuming culture: Linda Lê's autofiction', in *Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue,* ed. by Jane Bradley Winston and Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.242.

ethnic minority women's writing.[118] This upholds the racist and misogynist image of ethnic minority women in French society as silent and immobile Galatea figures who neither have nor need ideas of their own because white men speak for or through them. Indeed, *Le Conseiller*'s demand of jubilation relays his belief that the niece should submit not just her writing to his expert moulding but her will more generally. The niece's account of how she repeatedly says yes to *Le Conseiller*'s instructions as he outlines her new project illustrates how she often submits to his moulding.[119] Meanwhile the metaphors adopted in another statement, 'J'extirperai de votre tête toutes ces idées noires. […] Je vous gaverai de joie', especially the verbs to 'drag out' and 'force-feed', indicate the violence of the moulding process as he mobilises the notion of happiness and acceptance through integration to subjugate her will to his.[120]

The image of the publisher force-feeding the niece also evokes the idea of 'foie gras'. On the one hand, this forms one of the various references to animals, such as 'le petit oiseau affamé', which illustrate how *Le Conseiller* inferiorises and dehumanises the niece.[121] On the other hand, this notion of 'foie gras' also indicates that joy will transform the niece, as well as her writing, into a product to be consumed. In her analysis of food metaphors in Lê's works, Tess Do argues that the neighbours of Vinh L., another refugee in the eponymous short story in *Les Evangiles du crime* (1992), consume him and his origins like 'viande exotique' with their 'curiosité quasi cannibale'.[122] In *Calomnies*, *Le Conseiller* wants to offer up the niece's experiences in an autobiographical romance, depicting her as the embodiment of exotic femininity, to the rapacious appetites of French readers. This resonates with Mame-Fatou's argument that ethnic minority female writers in France are often limited to their origins in the literary market as they are 'condamnés à jouer de leur différence afin d'être adoubés par le centre'.[123] Likewise, the reference to 'foie gras', as a French delicacy in particular, suggests that this essentialising and exploitative process is not unique to *Le Conseiller* and the niece but prevalent across the French nation. In light of this and the way *Le Conseiller* is depicted as always having an ear to the literary market, 'à l'affût de ce qui doit être pensé, dit, lu, écrit, réalisé, *lancé*', his supposed interest in the niece's happiness and wellbeing appears driven by the self-seeking desire not only to be seen as her 'saviour' but also to increase the success of his precarious publishing business.[124]

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[118] Ibid.
[119] Lê (1993), p.31.
[120] Ibid. p.134.
[121] Ibid. p.37.
[122] Do (2015), p.145.
[123] Niang (2019), p.140.
[124] Lê (1993), p.121.

Le Conseiller's association of the niece's success as an author with her happiness also reveals that it is through the depiction of herself as a happy ethnic minority woman, whose contentment with life in France and her position as his 'protégée' paints a positive image of white French masculinity and society, that she will best satiate the rigid and cannibalistic appetites of the French literary market.[125] This illuminates how the happiness duty is often, as Ahmed notes, the duty to appear, rather than be, happy: as long as the niece writes as though she were happy she will be successful.[126] The hope of fame or just acceptance means the niece is tempted to follow *Le Conseiller*'s advice: 'Il y a la marionnette avide de succès, le morceau de chiffon qui voudrait être un oiseau bariolé lissant ses plumes devant un public nombreux […] la poupée vaniteuse veut s'échapper'.[127] Lê's insertion of the puppet/doll motif evokes how the niece's writing is influenced by the aspiration to please others whilst her reference to a colourful bird suggests that she envisages this as linked to her exotic status as a foreign woman in France. Lê explores this issue further in the short story 'La Grenouille' in her collection of auto-biographical essays *Le complexe de Caliban* (2005). She explains how an immigrant girl, who is compared to a frog by her mother, dreams of being transformed into an exotic princess in the eyes of onlookers in France: 'elle guettait dans les yeux des passants cette lueur d'indulgence qui faisait d'elle non une grenouille mais une créature à part, auréolée de la couronne de l'étrangère'.[128] This reveals that, as Gloria Kwok has demonstrated, Lê was 'led to believe that performing the ethnic stereotype made her more attractive'.[129] However, after she one day espies 'la haine et le mépris qu'inspirait son origine' in a stranger's gaze, the mirrors she looks into adopt the same dehumanising gaze and tells her that she is a 'paria, chienne, rate'.[130] The mirror's anthropomorphic insults signal the young woman's internalisation of the French man's hate-filled gaze and convey the vulnerability to which a dependency on others for self-worth necessarily leads for ethnic minority women who are fetishised as inferior and threatening strangers.

Lê further underlines how problematic internalising racialised and gendered discourses is for ethnic minority women through the Pygmalion myth. *Le Conseiller*'s continued disdain for those he moulds means that, even if the niece submits her will to his and commodifies her exotic origins, he will never accept her as a fully integrated equal. Ricin's admonishment of her for contemplating using her father for her 'publicité personnelle' in *L'Amour de leur vie* communicates another double bind which she faces, which Frye describes as 'situations in which

[125] Ibid. p.37.
[126] Ahmed (2017), p.53.
[127] Lê (1993), p.33.
[128] Lê (2005).
[129] Kwok, (2016) p.113.
[130] Lê (2005), p.31.

options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation'.[131] The niece is caught between two men and readerships in France: she could either gain fame in the postcolonial literary market as *Le Conseiller*'s model exotic female author, at the cost of commodifying her gender and origins, or jeopardise her literary success. The desire to please others, including Ricin and *Le Conseiller*, is a significant double bind for the niece and other ethnic minority women because, regardless of whether they try to erase or maintain their supposed ethnic or gender difference, the hierarchical power relations and inequalities at work in the marking process remain in place. Accordingly, even seemingly benevolent figures who profess concern for the niece's happiness and acceptance in French society can contribute to her inferiorisation and oppression. Similarly, the following section outlines how the niece gains an intersectional feminist consciousness of how her friend Ricin, who criticises the Pygmalion-like behaviour of other men, is also guilty of this.

Ricin's Intersectional Moulding Narratives

As with *Le Conseiller*, Ricin is present as the narrative unfolds and plays an important role in the niece's quest and the related decisions about her writing and relationships. As the one who compares Bellemort to Pygmalion, Ricin helps alert the niece to the existence of, as Favre notes about the racist paternalism in the novel, 'une hiérarchie cachée, une prise de pouvoir par condescendance'.[132] Examining the intertextuality Lê creates with the Pygmalion myth has unveiled how this helps her to identify a moulding process shaped by the intersection of sexism as well as racism and that this is not just limited to the literary sphere, as Favre suggests, but is society-wide.[133] Furthermore, the niece's reflections on their friendship as well as her relationship with *Le Conseiller* illuminate how she is applying this newfound intersectional feminist consciousness to identify the Pygmalion-like nature of Ricin's nihilist philosophy and his behaviour towards her.

Indeed, the niece's statement, 'Ricin a succédé à Bellemort et Weidman', conveys her realisation that his behaviour and attitudes differ little from the racist and sexist lovers he criticised and that, through her friendship with Ricin, she has exchanged these abusive relationships for another one.[134] She explains how he treated her during their first meeting when she took this publisher one of her manuscripts: 'Ricin m'avait regardé de haut. […] Il m'avait jugé

[131] Lê (1993), p.32; Frye (1983), p.2.
[132] Favre (2018), p.37.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Lê (1993), p.49.

au premier coup d'œil'.[135] Although Ricin criticises others for similar behaviour, his judgement based on the niece's appearance reveals how, from the beginning, he treats her with paternalism linked to the way he ties her reductively to not only her origins, as Bacholle-Bošković demonstrates, but also her gender.[136] As a result, he behaves like her 'donneur de leçons, l'insupportable frère qui a toujours une insulte en réserve'.[137] In this way, he creates the same Pygmalion teacher/pupil dynamic as Bellemort, also encouraging her to isolate herself from others and reject societal norms, in order to oppressively mould her and her writing. Lê highlights the silencing involved in this process, firstly, through the way Ricin often monopolises their discussions and the niece's statement, for example, that Ricin does not consider her opinion as he criticises Bellemort: 'Ricin […] ne veut pas entendre ce que j'ai, moi, à dire de l'homme à abattre'.[138] Secondly, she conveys this stylistically as chapters begin with the actions and speech of Ricin and other Pygmalion figures, rather than the niece.[139] The way he immobilises her is also emphasised in both the niece's statement that 'le vieux frère me tient en laisse' and her willingness to be at his beck and call, even after he ignores her for weeks.[140] The niece's reference to herself as a dog signals, as with other references to animals, how Ricin dehumanises her. The metaphor of the dog on a lead also functions similarly to the crowd metaphor employed by Ahmed as it simultaneously conveys how Ricin directs the niece and that she may not experience this pressure as oppressive when she does not try to resist it.[141]

Ricin's attitude towards the shoemaker and his reaction to advice from the niece exemplify the compatibility between his conception of universalist integration and how his racism and sexism intersect to oppressively direct and mould the niece. Throughout the novel, Ricin tries to distance the niece from the shoemaker, including by confronting him to scare him off without consulting the niece.[142] He tries to convince her that the cobbler will transform her into 'une poupée coupable' who will make her feel guilty about abandoning her origins and subsequently force her to return to Vietnam and relearn and write in her native tongue.[143] This can be linked to the promises of freedom and happiness as, by persuading the niece that the shoemaker will transform her into his guilty and submissive doll, Ricin indicates that he will remove the liberty and happiness to which she has access in France through integration. Ricin emphasises the risk

[135] Ibid. p.21.
[136] Bacholle-Bošković (2006), p.42.
[137] Lê (1993), p.21.
[138] Ibid. p.62.
[139] For example, chapters begin with phrases such as 'Ricin dit…' pp.21, 109; 'Ricin ne cesse de me répéter…' p.37; 'Ricin frappe à la porte' p.180.
[140] Lê (1993), pp.33, 108.
[141] Ahmed (2017), p.50.
[142] Lê (1993), p.70.
[143] Ibid. pp.70, 152.

that the Vietnamese shoemaker will oppress her through the argument that, just as the niece says about him, he will want her to 'le suivre partout comme un chien' and goes further by assuming that he must be 'un pervers, un tueur' and also 'un extrémiste'.[144] This vitriolic attack against the shoemaker far exceeds that used against the ethnic majority male characters as Ricin accuses him of physical violence and sexual predation as well as manipulation and exploitation. The way he links this to his argument that the shoemaker will force the niece to abandon France and French culture suggests that he believes he is prone to violence and sexism because of his Vietnamese ethnic origins. He thus presents the issue as one of cultural difference and depicts the niece as in need of protection from this threat to her universalist rights.

Hourria Bouteldja argues that the idea of protecting ethnic minority women from their inherently violent and patriarchal cultures and men was adopted in the French colonies, and in the 'state feminism' of postcolonial France today, to disempower ethnic minority men. [145] She explains that accusations that ethnic minority men and cultures oppress ethnic minority women are used to encourage these women to assimilate ostensibly egalitarian French cultural beliefs and practices to diminish any influence these men may have over them. Likewise, Ricin tries to persuade the niece that Vietnamese men like the shoemaker are extremists who will subjugate her and that, in contrast, assimilating French universalist values will offer her freedom from sex-based oppression. On the one hand, the depiction of French culture as enlightened and egalitarian through the demonization of ethnic minority men and cultures diminishes the sexism prevalent among the ethnic majority which has such a negative impact on the niece. On the other hand, this kind of enlightening and liberating assimilatory feminism is identified by Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, almost two decades after Lê's wrote *Calomnies*, as a modern 'mission civilisatrice' in France.[146] Bouteldja adds that white French feminism not only disempowers ethnic minority men but also appropriates and controls ethnic minority women.[147] In this way, trying to separate the niece from the shoemaker is, as Tess Do suggests, a means for Ricin to disempower this Vietnamese man and accordingly maintain his own influence over the niece.[148] Ricin's attempt to 'save' the niece from the shoemaker and Vietnamese culture by making her assimilate French values therefore functions similarly to Bellemort's moulding-integration as a modern 'mission

[144] Ibid. p.152.
[145] Houria Bouteldja, 'Race, classe et genre : l'intersectionnalité, entre réalité sociale et limites politiques', *Parti des Indigènes de la République,* (24/06/2013) <http://indigenes-republique.fr/race-classe-et-genre-lintersectionalite-entre-realite-sociale-et-limites-politiques/> [accessed 29/04/2020].
[146] See Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, 'Contre l'antiféminisme, le féminisme prend des couleurs', *Travail, Genre et Sociétés,* 2:32 (2014) <https://www.cairn.info/revue-travail-genre-et-societes-2014-2-page-157.htm> [accessed 08/02/2021].
[147] Bouteldja (24/06/2013).
[148] Do (2005), p.188.

civilisatrice'. Lê thus exposes how Ricin, whilst proclaiming the niece's wellbeing is his main concern, uses universalist discourse to reproduce a social hierarchy that contradicts the ideals allegedly upheld through the integration process.

Ricin's attitude to the niece's quest to discover both her real father and her identity is also shaped by his conception of integration and his desire to control the niece. Although he suggests she contact her uncle to hear what he has to say about her father's identity, it is with the hope that the uncle will offer her 'une panacée à tes envies de père'.[149] In other words, he is interested in helping her forget about her origins rather than reconnecting with her family or exploring her identity. His interest in her origins, as with the shoemaker, can be traced not to a concern with an egalitarian integration process and cultural differences incompatible with freedom but with his desire to have exclusive influence over her. This unveils the incongruous nature of his nihilist instruction 'reste seule […] cultive les marges' to avoid being subjugated by others and social norms, as he expects to be the exception to this rule.[150] This reveals, along with his racism towards the shoemaker and refusal to listen to what the niece has to say about her experiences of sexism, that Ricin's feminist anxiety for her is hollow and opportunistic. Yet, by implicitly linking it to the equally treacherous universalist promise of gaining freedom and equality through integration he is able, with Pygmalion-like mastery, to simultaneously mould this ethnic minority woman and mask the violence involved.

Lê depicts how this moulding process, and therefore Ricin's control over the niece, is tied closely to the way Ricin constructs and controls the narrative around the nation and his identity as a white man. Like Bellemort, he wishes the niece to uncritically accept his ideas and feels threatened by any attempt to undermine them. This is exemplified on the one occasion in which the niece openly challenges Ricin in the novel, namely for persuading himself that a scandal involving his grandmother was the fault of the 'ruthless' female journalist whom she allowed to publish her personal stories. Although he encourages the niece to 'tenir le monde par les couilles et ne plus le lâcher', he obviously does not expect her to apply it to him.[151] Instead, when she states that his depiction of his grandmother as a victim is an 'imposture', he makes the sexist and condescending accusation that she is nothing but *'une tueuse en dentelles'*.[152] When he then walks away, the niece recognises that 'Ricin s'est enfui pour sauvegarder son histoire'.[153] Just as *Le Conseiller* wants to silence the niece by directing her writing, Ricin wants to have complete

[149] Lê (1993), p.180.
[150] Ibid. p.33.
[151] Ibid. p.32.
[152] Ibid. pp.39, 40. Original emphasis.
[153] Ibid. p.40.

control over the narrative and, by extension, reality. This story is particularly significant because he employs this image of the journalist to justify his hatred of all young women.[154] By disputing his interpretation of this situation, the niece therefore undermines the pretext for his misogyny. As this is the basis for his abusive romantic relationships with women where his sole aim is 'de les humilier, de les blesser, de les marquer', this unmasks the violent and oppressive nature of his behaviour towards them because the niece reveals it to be unjustified.[155] Similarly, Ricin's desire to separate the niece from the shoemaker is motivated by his fear that she might deconstruct the narrative, particularly of freedom through integration, which has thus far allowed him, as a white man, to mould and direct her. Once more, the niece's nickname for him highlights the toxic nature of this Pygmalion-figure's behaviour as he is like a tick draining the niece's vitality and independence and growing fat on the power and inflated sense of self this gives him.

The Niece's Resistance: Breaking the Intersectional Mould and Forging a New Path

Through her re-writing of the Pygmalion myth from the perspective of an ethnic minority Galatea in *Calomnies*, Linda Lê sheds light on the experience of integration in French society. In particular, she reveals how multiple racist and sexist Pygmalion figures mould the niece towards silence and immobility in order to control and exploit her. Narrative techniques such as the imagery of imprisonment or the flow of a tide convey how the niece is immobilised whilst the way in which the French male characters' actions, speech or writing often dominate the niece's narrative underline how she is silenced. The mirroring of her experiences with those of, for example, Mlle Monnier and refugees emphasises the intersectional nature of the discrimination and oppression she faces whilst Lê's use of animal metaphors conveys how this involves the niece's inferiorisation and dehumanisation. Moreover, the symbolic names Lê gives to the white male characters illuminate not only the 'macabre' nature of Bellemort and Ricin's nihilism, as Huston notes, but also their hypocritical use of universalist promises of emancipation, equality or acceptance through integration to control her.[156]

Through her portrayal of multiple Pygmalion figures and the difficulty the niece has in escaping them, Lê conveys how the desire to control and exploit the niece is the norm rather than the exception in French society. This reveals that, in spite of Ricin's accusation that 'Il a toujours fallu que tu sois la poupée de quelqu'un', the niece's experiences of abuse and exploitation are caused primarily by structural inequalities oppressing postcolonial immigrant women rather than

[154] Ibid. p.42.
[155] Ibid. p.109.
[156] Huston (2004), p.328.

a desire to please others, which is merely a symptom of the former.[157] This contradicts Fauvel's argument that the niece is unconsciously responsible for such abusive relationships because she seeks to 'self-harm' through them to replace the paternal authority figure she has abandoned through exile.[158] The uncle's statement about how the niece is being directed highlights the structural nature of the power relations involved: 'j'observe tous ces gens dont les yeux extasiés fixent un but […] Elle aussi, elle court sur cette route, mais elle m'a reconnu…'.[159] This can be elucidated by Ahmed's description of power, as a mode of directionality, as 'a way of orientating bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future that is given a face'.[160] Here, the niece is caught up in the directive flow of power relations that restrict not only her behaviour and attitude but also those of others. The shared goal, the face of the future which entrances the niece, can be seen as the republican universalist promise of happiness, acceptance or freedom which she is told she can obtain through integration.

However, as this chapter demonstrates, Lê portrays how this universalist discourse can be a deceptive moulding tool whose power lies in the constant deferral of the reality it paints as possible. The differing stances of the Pygmalion figures in relation to cultural difference and integration can also be understood in this light. Although they each portray the overcoming or emphasising of her gender and ethnic difference as central to her freedom or acceptance in French society, Lê focuses not on the challenges of integration or assimilation, for example, but on the inequalities and discrimination facilitated through manipulative integration discourses and practices. She stresses the hypocritical use of republican universalist promises through the never-ending nature of the moulding process as the French male characters' racialisation and gendering of the niece means they will never see or treat her as their equal. This contradicts the argument, common in debates about integration between the late 80s and 90s, that cultural differences constitute the main barrier to integration.[161] Instead, the novel's intertextuality with the Pygmalion myth exposes, firstly, how discrimination and inequality hinder the demarginalisation of ethnic minority women and, secondly, how the limited focus on cultural differences masks and reproduces this reality in French society.

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[157] Lê (1993), p.70.
[158] See Maryse Fauvel, 'Déterritorialisation de l'identité de la langue des personnages de Linda Lê', *Romance Notes,* 42:3 (2002).
[159] Lê (1993), p.104.
[160] Ahmed (2017), p.43.
[161] Previous research has highlighted how the main focus of research during this period by the Haut Conseil à l'intégration, which both reflected and influenced integration discourses and policies, was on cultural differences, whilst the impact of discrimination was only seriously taken into account from the late 1990s. See 'Abstraction and Integration' in the Introduction and Hargreaves (2007), p.188.

In her analysis of *Les aubes* and *In memoriam*, Kate Averis argues that the ethnic minority female characters' experiences of patriarchal systems in their homeland give them a greater awareness of how to resist systemic power relations during their exile in France.[162] However, the niece's desire in *Calomnies* to escape the controlling and manipulative grasp of her own Vietnamese family is portrayed as making her more vulnerable in France. Indeed, the discourses of republican universalism and integration, that depict French values as key to emancipation, equality and fraternity, appeal to this young woman in her quest for freedom in exile and thus make her easy prey for men like Bellemort. The images Lê creates of the niece moulding herself and wishing to please the men in her life underline the challenges of resistance because of her internalisation of these promises and the inferiorising discourses they are made to mask. In this vein, Lê's re-writing of the Pygmalion myth enables her to expose the mythologisation of republican universalism as equality, freedom and fraternity through integration are not only not enacted but these ideas perpetuate discrimination and inequality, including through a modern-day *mission civilisatrice*.[163]

Nevertheless, the novel also reveals how the niece begins to develop an intersectional feminist consciousness of the power relations that shape her writing, relationships and French society generally. She demonstrates increasing awareness of Ricin's misogyny; how he tries to direct her behaviour; and the way he attempts to produce the narrative of her life without her input. She also connects *Le Conseiller*'s moulding of Mlle Monnier and his attempts to mould her into his ethnic minority female 'protégée'. As the novel's title *Calomnies* suggests, her ability to reveal and thereby challenge the violence of their behaviour, which they would deny and falsely class as slander, demonstrates how she has relinquished the internalised need to please others in order to gain a more positive and independent sense of self. Indeed, she is now able to identify how the racism and sexism of the ethnic majority male characters, including in Bellemort's novels and Weidman's notebook, slanders her as an ethnic minority woman. There is therefore hope that her new intersectional feminist consciousness will help her to overcome the oppression she faces.

Ultimately, the niece decides to abandon her apartment and the area and so chooses to escape the way others, including her Vietnamese family and French colleague and friend, mould

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[162] Averis, (2011).

[163] This reflects Linda Lê's essay 'La fin du mythe' in *Le complexe de Caliban* in which, as Leslie Barnes demonstrates, she challenges 'the mythical ideal of the French civilizing mission'. Leslie Barnes, 'Toward a "Littérature déplacée": The Aesthetics of Exile in Lê's Nonfiction', in *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature,* ed. by Leslie Barnes (Lincoln and London: Nebraska University Press, 2014), p.218; Lê (2005).

and direct her through integration because of her gender and origins.[164] When she receives her uncle's notebook responding to her inquiry about her real father's identity, the niece therefore decides not open it and takes it on a final walk with Ricin. During this walk, the niece senses a presence beside her and, recognising the shoemaker's dog, she sees that it goes right at the junction when Ricin goes left. The niece then hands Ricin the notebook, states '*Je m'en vais*' and pursues the dog.[165] Having been metaphorically kept on a lead by Ricin for a long time, Linda Lê gives the niece the final word and choice of direction. Dao interprets the niece leaving for an unknown destination as a form of voluntary exile from the constraints of both the home and host nations while Do argues that, like the dog she follows, the niece now submits to her fellow exile's authority.[166] The niece's abandonment of both Ricin and her origins as she hands the former the notebook and joins the shoemaker's dog, which is not with its owner and therefore not on its lead, reveal that she no longer looks to any of them to 'lui indiquer le chemin'.[167] Likewise, the statement '*Je m'en vais*' illustrates the niece's aim to overcome the Pygmalion-like attempts to immobilise and silence her as an ethnic minority woman and, instead, find her own, less oppressive path.

The fact that the niece no longer has to write for *Le Conseiller*, along with the uncle's realisation from her letter that writing is key to her identity, suggests that this will be central to her resistance. Indeed, the uncle paints a very different picture of the niece than the French men who conceive her as a victim or a threat as he identifies her writing as a source of strength: 'En choisissant d'écrire, elle est déjà sauvée, elle s'est sauvée elle-même'.[168] Rather than depending on those who falsely present themselves as saviour figures in order to subjugate her, the niece uses her own writing to swim against the tide of societal pressures encouraging ethnic minority women to submit their wills and sense of self to others. However, in light of the simultaneity of resistance and complicity in the niece's previous attempts to escape Pygmalion figures and discourses, the novel's open-ending also expresses the risk that she will never entirely escape the Pygmalion integration paradigm and attempts to oppressively mould her will. The niece's quest for identity in *Calomnies* therefore leads to a constant struggle for a will and sense of self that escape reductive social categories and break the exploitative, immobilising and silencing mould of Pygmalion-like republican universalist discourses and practices.

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[164] Lê (1993), p.181.
[165] Ibid. Original emphasis.
[166] Dao (2012), p.715; Do (2005), p.190.
[167] Lê (1993), pp.12, 104.
[168] Ibid. p.176.

Integration, Oppression and Narrative-Moulding in *Les dits d'un idiot*

Linda Lê explores the Pygmalion integration paradigm further through Mortesaison's experiences working for Ragot and the Maya agency in *Les dits d'un idiot*. Although she is not given a direct voice in the same way as the niece, the narrator's caustic and often parodic portrayals of Mortesaison's ordeals highlight the violent and oppressive moulding this postcolonial migrant woman faces. This section demonstrates how this novel sheds greater light on integration as an intersectional *mission civilisatrice* in France; the socio-economic inequalities that facilitate and are reproduced through this moulding process; and how this is a legacy of a colonial history which is actively denied and rewritten. Lê achieves this through intertextuality with the Pygmalion myth, allegorical imagery, mirroring, and symbolic naming. Whilst it is not clear whether Mortesaison develops an intersectional feminist consciousness to the same extent as the niece in *Calomnies*, this analysis reveals how Lê's adaptation of the Pygmalion myth in *Les dits d'un idiot* facilitates such consciousness by elucidating the moulding mechanisms of an oppressive integration process. Further, it explores how the novel subverts this Pygmalion-like process as it rejects reductive and essentialising identity categories and, by taking the experiences of an ethnic minority woman into account, rewrites the narrative about French society and republican universalism.

Ragot and Mortesaison's 'Liberating' Cage

When Mortesaison, a newly arrived Vietnamese immigrant, appears on Ragot's doorstep in response to the nonagenarian's advert for a companion, he instantly concludes that she needs and deserves to be 'sauvée'.[169] During the five years in which he employs her, he makes himself her 'maître à panser' to heal 'la plaie béante au cœur de Mortesaison en lui mettant des livres et encore des livres entre les mains'.[170] In this vein, he believes he can 'save' Mortesaison by forcing her to study his vast book collection and testing her knowledge to ensure that 'la leçon n'avait pas été trop mal assimilée' or, in other words, that she has assimilated his particular ideas.[171] Although no specific details are given about what Ragot teaches Mortesaison, the texts he uses or what he believes she needs saving from, his actions are based on his immediate impression of her and, as a result, her appearance. This, along with his attempts to separate her from her origins, especially a man from her homeland she calls the *Jumeau*, suggests that the alleged 'wound' in her heart is linked to her Vietnamese origins and culture and that it is from this that Ragot wishes to save and thus emancipate her. Further, the teacher/pupil dynamic Ragot creates and his

[169] Lê (1995), pp.57, 134. Lê identifies the unnamed country as Vietnam in Kurmann (2010). Lê (1995), pp.56, 59, 131-33.
[170] Lê (1995), pp.58, 59.
[171] Ibid. p.59.

scolding of Mortesaison for her '*sentimentalité criminelle*' mirrors Bellemort's 'éducation antisentimentale' in *Calomnies* and highlights that his moulding of his employee is shaped by the intersection of his sexist as well as racist ideal for ethnic minority women.[172] Similarly, his self-construction as her 'maître à panser' illustrates, firstly, how this moulding is linked to his dehumanisation of the niece as 'panser' means not only to heal but also to clean animals. Secondly, this phrase signals his related assumption that his beliefs and practices are superior to hers because of her gender and origins and, consequently, that he has the right to impose them on her for her own good. Moreover, the slogans Ragot drills into Mortesaison's head, such as '*pars avant qu'on t'approche! mords avant qu'on t'apprivoise!*', reveal that he professes to enlighten her about how others wish to control or 'tame' her and teach her to be free and emotionally independent.[173] However, as with Bellemort and Ricin, Ragot behaves like a *maître penseur* rather than *maître à penser* because his approval is based not on Mortesaison thinking independently or critically but on assimilating his ideas and adopting or adapting to his particular habits, such as admiring his collection of tsantsas, or shrunken heads.[174]

The Pygmalion moulding-integration Ragot imposes on Mortesaison, facilitated through the promise it will enlighten and emancipate her, resembles the present-day universalist *mission civilisatrice* that Lê depicts as taking place on French soil in *Calomnies*. Ragot, like Bellemort and Ricin, employs an assimilationist education process to restrictively mould and direct Mortesaison's behaviour and attitudes and thereby reinforce his authority over her: 'elle ne devait faire aucun pas sans qu'il l'eût dirigé elle ne devait avoir aucune pensée sans qu'il en fût alerté'.[175] His ultimate goal for this moulding process is to subjugate her will to his own, as demonstrated in his delight that Mortesaison 'parlait peu protestait jamais se tenait toujours près de lui devançant chacun de ses désirs'.[176] She not only submits to his will by accepting the oppression she faces without complaint, but appears directed by it before Ragot expresses it. Once again, the treacherous promise of emancipation through assimilatory integration is mobilised by a supposedly benevolent French Pygmalion to sculpt this Galatea into his own ideal dimensions for ethnic minority women: silent, immobile and submissive.[177] The negative impact this has on Mortesaison is visible, as will be examined later, even after she has left his employment and underscores how the healing and freedom he promises are incompatible with his behaviour.

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[172] Ibid. p.68. Original emphasis.
[173] Ibid. pp.58, 59. Original emphasis.
[174] Ibid. pp.59-60, 158.
[175] Ibid. p.118.
[176] Ibid. p.135.
[177] See Ahmed on the promise of happiness in Ahmed (2017).

Linda Lê uses references to Ragot's two collections, of tsantsas and exotic girls, to unveil the appropriation involved in his hunger for power and how this is a legacy of racialised and sexualised colonial discourses. The tsantsas were created by the Jivaroan peoples of South America by shrinking the heads of their enemies slain in battle and sewing their mouths shut to symbolise their own power and prowess. As well as signalling Ragot's thirst for dominion over others, transforming them into 'des présences silencieuses et dociles', his collection of these cultural artefacts as a white French man raises questions about how the postcolonial commodification of other cultures as exotic also constitutes a dehumanising appropriation.[178] This issue is explored further by Lê in Ragot's 'collection' of exotic girls: an album filled with the photos he had taken years earlier of young women whom he had paid to adopt erotic positions with his menagerie of toy animals.[179] The fact that his advertisement called for dark haired, amber-skinned women from 'les quatre coins du monde' reveals his sexualised exotification of these women, probably from formerly colonised countries, as objects for his pleasure.[180] Indeed, Ragot's statement that these women cannot be distinguished from the toy animals, '*ça se confondait avec la ménagerie*', highlights how he objectifies and dehumanises these ethnic minority women.[181] His collection of photos he creates is therefore redolent of colonial postcards with photos of 'exotic' women which, as Malek Alloula and Jennifer Yee argue, were often little more than a form of pornography based upon a 'degrading sexual fantasy' that was both racist and sexist in nature.[182] As an allegory for the French nation, Ragot's 'hôtel particulier' is therefore a site in which the colonial practice of collecting and appropriating the bodies as well as artefacts of the colonised finds traces in the present as Ragot wishes to collect and mould postcolonial female immigrants like Mortesaison.

The imagery employed by Lê conveys the oppressive and dehumanising nature of the Pygmalion moulding and integration process. Whilst celebrating Mortesaison's submission to him, Ragot exclaims '*quelle splendide capture!*', emphasising his desire to 'collect' Mortesaison, and the narrator describes how, in Ragot's his 'hôtel particulier', 'tout avait été disposé de telle sorte qu'elle ne pût s'échapper de la cage sans être foudroyée sur-le-champ'.[183] Examining the symbolism of the cage from an intersectional perspective can illuminate how Lê uses this motif to

[178] Lê (1995), p.60.
[179] Ibid. p.176.
[180] Ibid. p.174.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Jennifer Yee, 'Recycling the "Colonial Harem"? Women in Postcards from French Indochina', *French Cultural Studies,* 15:1 (2004) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0957155804040405> [accessed 08/07/2021]; Referencing M. Alloula, *Le harem colonial : images d'un sous-érotisme*, (Anglet: Atlantica-Séguier, 1981).
[183] Lê (1995), p.135.

explore the complex nature of oppression. Frye also employs the image of a bird cage to understand oppression: 'the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon'.[184] Through reference to the multiple wires forming a birdcage, Frye relates how various systematically related factors, such as economic position, sex-based discrimination or gender norms, come together to immobilise an individual or group. In order to gain this macroscopic perspective of the cage and oppression, it is important to consider the various means by which Ragot immobilises the niece and the reasons why she is unable or unwilling to escape this situation.

Irrational and vitriolic tirades are one of the ways in which Ragot punishes Mortesaison for behaving in ways that do not please him and thereby discourages her from doing so in the future. Whenever her interpretation of his books differs from his own, the narrator illustrates how Ragot makes 'des rugissements de colère' and uses insults such as 'gazelle écervelée' that dehumanise the niece.[185] On the few occasions he believes she has sufficiently assimilated his ideas, he gives her a tour of his tsantsas and remarks that no previous companion had been 'jugée digne d'admirer la collection'.[186]

Through a reward/punishment disciplinary system, Ragot promotes the idea that Mortesaison has to prove herself 'digne' and therefore deserving of his toleration. Hallstead argues that the Pygmalion paradigm involves moulding Galatea into the perfect women in order to make her 'worthy of his love'.[187] By delineating the conditions of Mortesaison's worthiness of his approval, Ragot therefore restricts this Galatea's behaviour and moulds her towards his ideal image of an ethnic minority woman. In her ethnographic study of linguistic assimilation interviews in France, Sara Mazouz identifies a similar discourse as French naturalisation is painted as a favour granted only to those who have demonstrated their 'deservingness' through integration.[188] Whilst her study is carried out two decades after *Les dits d'un idiot* is written, this rhetoric is adopted by the Conseil d'État in the 1980s as it sets out how, rather than a right, 'la naturalisation […] constitue une faveur accordée par l'état français à un étranger'.[189] Mazouz argues that this attitude arises from the assumption that French values and cultural practices are superior to

[184] Frye (1983), pp.4-5.
[185] Lê (1995), p.59.
[186] See ibid. pp.59, 177.
[187] Hallstead (2013), p.3.
[188] Sarah Mazouz, 'The Value of Nation: Bureaucratic Practices and the Lived Experience in the French Naturalization Process', *French Politics, Culture & Society,* 37:1 (2019), p.142.
[189] Gazier, Bonichot, and Denoix de Saint-Marc, 'Conseil d'Etat statuant au contentieux N° 40735', (30/03/1984) <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichJuriAdmin.do?idTexte=CETATEXT000007707598> [accessed 15/04/2020].

those of other countries, particularly non-European, and leads to an evaluation of the 'worthiness' of the candidates.[190] Mortesaison's experiences resonate with this process as Ragot insists on the superiority of his own misanthropic philosophy and only sees Mortesaison as 'digne' to be tolerated and participate in his activities when she assimilates his values and practices.[191] Additionally, the conception of acquiring citizenship through integration as an honour makes it, as Ahmed notes, a condition of happiness for immigrants.[192] Indeed, related to its proposal that integration should be based on a strong sense of national unity, the 1988 *Commission de la nationalité* report notes that the unwavering belief in the superiority of French universal values under the Third Republic facilitated assimilation as 'personne ne doutait […] du bonheur que ne manqueraient pas de connaitre ceux qui allaient devenir français et participer à un destin national glorieux'.[193] Similarly, Ragot's insistence upon the superiority of his beliefs and practices, evidenced in his assumption that he can 'save' her by forcing her to assimilate them, and the freedom and happiness they supposedly offer is meant to instil in Mortesaison the desire to gain access to them. In turn, this encourages her to meet the conditions of deservingness and integration, and consequently freedom and happiness, defined by Ragot.

Ragot's emphatic reminders that others have not been granted such privileges remind Mortesaison of the fate for those whom he judges 'unworthy'. For example, when previous companions suggest opening up the abandoned rooms of his 'hôtel particulier', Ragot flies into a rage: making 'des rugissements de fureur' and describing these women as '*caqueteuses et astiqueuses*', he fires them and chases them from the house.[194] This kind of irrationality is identified by Jane O'Sullivan as common in depictions of Pygmalion in various cinematic adaptations of the Ovidian myth. She argues that it is evidence of male frustration arising from an obsession with power and, in particular, the fear that it might be undermined.[195] Likewise, Ragot's overreaction to these women's suggestions reveals his preoccupation with power as he sees something innocent as a threat to his authority. Blaming them also serves to justify their violent expulsion from his home as dehumanised objects of abjection and restore his sense of power and superiority.

Ragot's punishment of his former employees is reminiscent of the treatment of the Propoetides in the tale preceding Ovid's Pygmalion myth. These Cypriot women are punished by

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[190] Mazouz (2019), p.144.
[191] Lê (1995), p.177.
[192] See Ahmed (2010), p.133.
[193] Long (1988), p.24.
[194] Lê (1995), p.60.
[195] Jane O'Sullivan, 'Virtual Metamorphoses: Cosmetic and Cybernetic Revisions of Pygmalion's "Living Doll"', *Arethusa,* 41:1 (2008) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44578499> [accessed 16/03/2020] (p.147).

the Goddess Venus for denying her divinity: she makes them the first women to prostitute themselves and then, as they lose any sense of shame, transforms them into stone.[196] Also from Cyprus, Pygmalion develops repulsion for women because, as Paula James notes, he interprets the defects imposed upon the Propoetides by Venus as innate.[197] The Propoetides therefore play an important role in Galatea's creation because Pygmalion's fetishisation of them leads him to sculpt the perfect woman from ivory. In a reversal of the Propoetides' petrification because of their defiance of authority, Galatea's submission to Pygmalion's sculpting, allowing him to perfect her form, means that she is later transformed into the flesh by Venus as Pygmalion's reward. In Lê's adaptation, the Propoetides in the form of the companions defy Pygmalion rather than Venus by not fully acknowledging Ragot's (desired) authority over them as a semi-divine figure who can 'save' or punish women. Moreover, his insults based on the terms 'caqueter' and 'astiquer', slang for to gossip and masturbate respectively, resemble the charge of 'willfulness' that Ahmed argues is often directed at women who fail to embody the idealised image of femininity whereby women renounce their individual will to please others.[198] By labelling his companions 'caqueteuses' and 'astiqueuses', Ragot marks them as willful or deviant Propoetides who prefer to please themselves rather than him. He thus presents submission to him and his desires as women's only purpose and depicts his violent, irrational behaviour towards them as a legitimate response to their behaviour.[199]

Ragot's outbursts against the Propoetides before he expels them, especially the image of him roaring, are mirrored in his treatment of Mortesaison as he 'poussait des rugissements de colère' when he is unhappy with her interpretation of the texts he makes her read.[200] This signals the latent but pervasive threat that Mortesaison may also face expulsion. Although Ragot treats her as an exception because of her origins and imposes his assimilationist education that his other companions do not receive, Ragot subjects Mortesaison to the same despotic behaviour through this process. Yet Mortesaison submits to his tyrannies where previous companions abandoned him or tried to change his behaviour.[201] Jane Freedman notes that ethnic minority women in France are commonly caught in badly paid gendered roles, particularly domestic, care and hospitality work, and more likely to be further exploited in these roles than white, French women as employers take advantage of their potentially precarious socio-economic situations.[202]

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[196] See translation of the Pygmalion myth in James (2011), pp.10-11.
[197] Ibid. p.13.
[198] Ahmed (2017), p.68. As 'caqueter' also refers to the noise made by hens, this term is yet another example of how Ragot dehumanises women through a comparison with animals.
[199] Ibid. p.73.
[200] Lê (1995), p.59.
[201] Ibid. p.60.
[202] Freedman (2004), p.121.

Similarly, there are intersecting socio-economic factors that Ragot manipulates to trap and exploit Mortesaison. These include the financial security that Mortesaison's employment offers her which, even if conditional, is important for a newly arrived immigrant in France who is less likely than French women to have access to the knowledge and socio-economic resources to find another post. Cognisant of this, Ragot isolates Mortesaison from the outside world by refusing to let her outside: 'interdiction était fait à Mortesaison de voir la lumière du jour avant de s'être familiarisée avec les milliers de livres accumulés sur les rayonnages c'est donc ainsi que Mortesaison échoua dans la nasse du centenaire'.[203] This reveals not only how he immobilises Mortesaison but also how he achieves this through republican universalist discourses as he justifies it through the argument that she cannot leave before she has assimilated his cultural beliefs. Furthermore, the reference to the thousands of books she must read highlights how this goal is intentionally made unattainable and how she is permanently caught in his grasp.

Ragot also tries to make Mortesaison halt all contact with a man from her homeland she nicknames *le Jumeau*, the only other person to whom she has ties.[204] Like Bellemort and Ricin's allegedly liberating *mission civilisatrice*, Ragot frames this as a means to eradicate her 'sentimentalité criminelle' and protect her from the attempts of ethnic minority men to control her.[205] Nonetheless, the self-serving nature of this action is revealed by the narrator's description of this argument as a pretext and Ragot's sense of triumph when, believing Mortesaison has halted all contact with *le Jumeau*, 'elle n'avait que lui au monde'.[206] Thus Ragot mobilises the promise of individual emancipation to limit the influence of others on her and so gain greater control over Mortesaison.[207] In addition, Ragot further limits Mortesaison's knowledge about French society by encouraging her to read only the 'fait divers' in the newspaper and watches with 'l'oiel vigilant' to ensure that she burns everything else.[208] In this vein, Ragot makes it harder for Mortesaison to make connections or see advertisements to access better employment opportunities.

Each of these elements constitutes a barrier of which this French man, whose privilege is symbolised in his 'hôtel particulier', takes advantage to imprison this ethnic minority woman. In turn, he uses the threat of expulsion and her precariousness, as well as elusory promises of emancipation and acceptance through integration, to subjugate and restrictively mould Mortesaison in ways that less vulnerable French women could more easily resist. This is evident in

[203] Lê (1995), p.58.
[204] Ibid. pp.58, 68.
[205] Ibid. p.68.
[206] Ibid. p.118.
[207] Ibid. p.58.
[208] Ibid. p.146.

the way that Mortesaison 'n'était que trop pressé' to take the first opportunity she can to escape and also how, until this point, she submits to Ragot's demands: 'tout ce qu'elle avait lu elle l'avait lu pour avoir la paix tout ce qu'elle avait appris elle l'avait appris pour avoir la paix elle s'était appliqué pour avoir la paix'.[209] Comparing power and oppression to the flow of the tide, Ahmed explains that submitting one's will to the directionality of the tide can be experienced as a 'relief of pressure'.[210] This relief or peace Mortesaison experiences demonstrates how 'being willing can be a consequence of force' and, as such, indicative of Mortesaison's subjugation rather than emancipation.[211] Her silent submission to the flow of the tide illustrates the self-perpetuating nature of domination as it is easier for her to accept and become complicit in her own oppressive moulding than to struggle against it.[212] Ahmed argues that such silence in the face of injustice is common when socio-economic inequalities would mean speaking out involves risking one's job or worsening one's situation.[213] Likewise, Mortesaison dare not risk her employer's wrath for fear of losing the stable employment and home that, as an isolated ethnic minority woman in France, she might struggle to find elsewhere. In light of this, her silent submission is evidence less of her desire to replace a paternal authority figure from her homeland because of a sense of guilt at having abandoned them, as Fauvel argues, than of the smooth functioning of unequal structural power relations in France.[214]

Ultimately, Mortesaison's complicity with her oppression leads to Ragot's proposal that, in an inversion of the original myth, they be permanently united in death by having Mortesaison buried with him '*tête-bêche dans la même tombe*' so that her lips are 'contre les pieds de son tuteur'.[215] Although this union might initially suggest that Mortesaison has successfully and permanently integrated into life in the 'hôtel particulier' or French society, Ragot surrounds it in a vocabulary of worthiness: '*aucune demoiselle de compagnie n'avait jusqu'alors été jugée digne de cet honneur*'.[216] The condition of worthiness is highlighted in the position Ragot gives Mortesaison which, like the repentant woman kissing Jesus' feet, implies that this 'integration' is not as an equal but as someone who must eternally express gratitude for the moulding process by which Ragot supposedly saves her.[217] Mazouz notes that new French citizens do not escape the rhetoric of naturalisation as a favour dependent on worthiness because they are still expected to

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[209] Ibid. pp.105, 46.
[210] Ahmed (2017), p.50.
[211] Ibid.
[212] See Pyke (2010), p.561; Ahmed (2017), p.141.
[213] Ahmed (2017), p.260.
[214] Fauvel (2002), p.331.
[215] Lê (1995), p.103. Original emphasis.
[216] Ibid. Original emphasis.
[217] Luke 7:36-38, New International Version: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+7&version=NIV> [accessed 14/04/2020].

demonstrate that they are 'obliged to the nation'.[218] Similarly, Ragot expects Mortesaison to be perpetually obliged to him for saving her, firstly, from Vietnamese patriarchal culture and, secondly, from abjection and expulsion like the Propoetides.

Another scene about ingratitude in the novel conveys how racism and sexism intersect in such discourses. When a woman denounces her abusive lover for stealing from his employer, he likens her behaviour as a 'gonzesse' to 'les pays sous-développés' who are ungrateful for the aid they receive from France: 'il ne faut pas armer les faibles car leur énergie vengeresse n'attend que la première occasion pour se déchaîner contre le bienfaiteur…'.[219] The abusive lover, like Ragot, depicts white men and the French nation as the generous and superior benefactor of women and developing countries and masks the violence of their *mission civilisatrice* and the inequalities it reproduces. The mirroring Lê creates between these two scenes highlights how Ragot inferiorises Mortesaison because of her gender and origins and then uses this supposed inferiority to blame her for wanting to escape an oppressive job and relationship. As this gratitude also demonstrates her worthiness, the need to perpetually prove her deservingness reveals that Ragot's toleration of her remains conditional and her integration perpetually incomplete. Ragot's discursive employment of worthiness and integration is therefore meant to permanently maintain her in an inferior position and subjugate her to his will. As such, the Pygmalion-like nature of integration discourse, including notions of deservingness and gratitude, facilitates the oppression of ethnic minority women as it coalesces with and reinforces pre-existing socio-economic inequalities and intersecting power relations in French society.

Nevertheless, Mortesaison overcomes multiple oppressive barriers to gain employment as a writer for the Maya Agency and thus escape Ragot's cage and the coffin which is to replace it. Mortesaison's love for the *Jumeau* aids her escape because, as Do notes, it gives her the courage to defy Ragot's commands and then leave him.[220] She takes advantage of a lapse in Ragot's surveillance to read the advertisements section in the newspaper and, like Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, utilize the education gained from Ragot to escape him and obtain her new employment.[221] As such, knowledge becomes a way for Mortesaison to escape this oppressive situation. Moreover, the covert nature of her behaviour, as 'elle prépara en silence sa fuite', transforms her silence into a form of resistance because it means that, believing she remains submissive, Ragot does not expel her and potentially place her in a more vulnerable position.[222]

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[218] Mazouz (2019), p.145.
[219] Lê (1995), pp.168-69.
[220] Ibid. p.118.
[221] Ibid. p.146.
[222] Ibid.

Yet, by leaving Ragot silently, Mortesaison loses any chance to control the narrative. Lê's symbolic naming of Ragot, meaning malicious gossip, underlines how he employs the discourses of salvation, integration and gratitude to slander this ethnic minority woman as a '*chienne relapse! poussière félone! bâtarde de vipérine!*' guilty of 'trahison'.[223] This reflects the way in which ethnic minority women, as Guénif-Souilamas notes, are treated as ignorant and ungrateful traitors if they reject the integration conditions of the *mission civilisatrice* enacted through traditional or state feminist movements in France.[224] Likewise, Ragot's accusation performatively dehumanises Mortesaison as an object of abjection like the Propoetides and consequently protects his sense of superiority as a white, French man and masks the racist and sexist discourses through which he justifies an oppressive integration process.

Furthermore, although Do argues that *le Jumeau*, by helping Mortesaison leave Ragot, 'removes his sister from paternal authority [and] takes full possession of his sister's feelings', this overlooks the continued influence Ragot has over her, even after his suicide.[225] The narrator states that Mortesaison speaks with 'la voix d'une infante possédée par un vieillard qui lui avait déchiré les entrailles […] pour venir se loger en elle pour que chaque jour la marionnette aille sur la tombe du ventriloque'.[226] Like the niece in *Calomnies*, Ragot's metaphorical haunting of Mortesaison illustrates how her internalisation of his ideas means that he continues to influence her even after she leaves him and he commits suicide. This 'possession', emphasised stylistically as Mortesaison repeats Ragot's catch phrases throughout the narrative, conveys how she remains a puppet to his Pygmalion-like universalist discourses whilst the image of him disembowelling her underlines the violence involved. Moreover, the afterlife of such moulding discourses, as they haunt her after Ragot's death, suggests that they, and the harm they cause, are very difficult to escape. Lê explores this further through her depiction of how the niece's Pygmalion-like clients at the Maya agency try to mould not just her and her writing but also, allegorically, France's past.

The *Agence Maya* and the Rewriting of France's Past

The clients of the *Agence Maya* are, like Ragot's dilapidated 'hôtel particulier', formerly successful celebrities whose days of glory have since passed. However, they refuse to accept this and, working for this agency 'à but philanthropique', Mortesaison invents press articles and fan mail to 'recouvre d'un voile d'illusion *échecs déveines chutes dégringolades pertes d'influence faillites de*

[223] Ibid. pp.117, 36.
[224] Guénif-Souilamas (2014), p.161.
[225] Do (2005), p.187.
[226] Lê (1995), pp.91-92.

renommée'.[227] The way in which Mortesaison rewrites both the past and, as a result, the present for her clients can be seen as an allegory for how the less savoury elements of France's history are often denied and rewritten. The link between these personal stories and those of the nation is illustrated by Lê through her description of the writers at the agency as 'scribes', as though they were writing official historical documents.[228] The irony in this comparison is highlighted through the emphasis on the fictitious and creative nature of this writing, as 'Mortesaison invente la vie comme un conte de fées', and through the way the author is moulded and manipulated.[229] Mortesaison's clients threaten her when she reminds them of memories they would rather remained forgotten, such as when a professional knife-thrower accidentally cut off his partner's ear: 'Mortesaison avait outrepassé ses droits et les vieux tigres n'obtenant pas le remboursement écrivirent à l'agence pour réclamer le renvoi de la petite employée'.[230] The fact that these clients refer to Mortesaison with same kind of condescending paternalism as Ragot, or *Le Conseiller* in *Calomnies*, as 'la petite employée' suggests that they also mark her with gender and ethnic difference. Their suggestion that she does not have the right to 'rappeler' their failures can be compared with *Le Conseiller*'s insistence that she not 'slander' the French because of her origins. Further, they use the same kind of threat as Ragot by demanding that she write in a way that pleases them or face dismissal which, because she remains in precarious socio-economic position in France, leaves her little room for manoeuvre or resistance. Instead, she must submit to the will of her clients and allow them, as is *Le Conseiller*'s wish in *Calomnies*, to 'dicter à la *petite employée* quelques phrases électriques du moins à lui insuffler l'esprit'.[231] The writing of the nation's history is therefore not only deceptive and fanciful but is restrictively moulded and directed by those who still have greater influence in the country because of the self-perpetuating nature of unequal power relations.

Lê reinforces the idea that French history is being chiselled away at and moulded by Pygmalion figures and discourses through mirroring with Ragot's abandoned rooms. The way in which he ferociously guards the abandoned rooms of his house and punishes anyone who tries to enter them suggests that they represent the unsavoury moments of France's past which must be actively denied. As one of these rooms was the site in which he photographed and 'collected' exotified and sexualised women, it is likely that France's colonial past and its violent appropriation of colonised women in particular is one element that must remain forgotten. In this way, one of the conditions for integration for postcolonial immigrants like Mortesaison is that they become

[227] Ibid. p.28. Original emphasis.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid. p.93.
[230] Ibid. p.132.
[231] Ibid. p.131. Original emphasis.

complicit in this erasure of the violent, discriminatory and exploitative elements of French imperialism that shaped their and their ancestors' lives, including in their own writing.

Similarly, Blanchard argues that the continuity between the assimilationist *mission civilisatrice* and modern integration policy arises from not only the active denial of France's colonial past but also of how it was facilitated through its discourses of republican universalism.[232] In particular, the refusal to reflect on the potential compatibility of the discourses and policies of republican universalism with the inferiorisation and oppression of others in the past and present allows the reproduction of inequalities. Likewise, the denial of past failures and inequalities in *Les dits d'un idiot* makes it possible to present the French nation and republican universalism as superior in the present. Beyond Ragot's obsession with power and his insistence that his philosophy and culture are key to universal emancipation, Lê also highlights this in a scene in which the narrator visits a museum with his mother. In his typical caustic tone, the narrator conveys how the visitors are more interested in the symbolic rather than aesthetic value of the art works as a form of *patrimoine* to which they can lay claim as a nation.[233] Portrayed as having the religious fervour of 'fidèles' in relation to these artefacts, they conceive them not only as a source of national pride which unites them but also as '*le patrimoine du genre humain! le summum du raffinement!*'.[234] Like Ragot's supposedly universalist beliefs and practices, these particular works are seen as the pinnacle of civilisation's creative powers and therefore something that must be universally valued. Yet the museum visitors are also keen to 'faire valoir leurs droits de propriétaires', thereby claiming these works as evidence of their superiority as a nation and their right to enlighten others as a result.[235] However, the fact that the only other artefacts present in the novel, namely Ragot's tsantsas, symbolise the violent appropriation of the colonised underlines how such discourses linking universalism and national pre-eminence have justified and masked socio-economic hierarchies both before and after the demise of France's colonial empire.

Whilst Lê's works have often interrogated the pressures placed upon postcolonial female writers, her allegorical depiction of Mortesaison's experience at the Maya agency reflects on how history itself is a work of fiction that can be moulded by Pygmalion-like figures and discourses. The author reveals how this process of re-writing and erasure, particularly the mythologisation of republican universalism as enacted in French society, reproduces multiple and intersecting power relations. In particular, she exposes how the depiction of integration as a necessarily emancipatory process facilitates the oppressive moulding of ethnic minority women like

[232] Blanchard (2000).
[233] Lê (1995), p.70.
[234] Ibid. p.72.
[235] Ibid. p.70.

Mortesaison. Additionally, Lê refuses to offer a reductive portrayal of resistance as she explores how Mortesaison's socio-economic vulnerability and the denial of inequalities in the past are used to mould her into complicity with this national postcolonial project. Yet, ultimately, Mortesaison chooses to leave this role and thus refuses the Pygmalion-like forces moulding both her and history through it. Yet the open-ending of the novel, as Mortesaison waits to be physically or fantastically reunited with *le Jumeau*, offers no certainty about whether she will achieve her desired communion with *le Jumeau* or escape from her Pygmalion-like tormentors.[236]

Whilst the success of Mortesaison's resistance is uncertain, Linda Lê subverts the Pygmalion paradigm and the intersecting power relations involved in France through the narrative. As well as revealing the mechanisms involved in an inegalitarian and exploitative moulding-integration process, including the re-writing of France's colonial history and postcolonial present, Lê's depiction of Mortesaison defies the attempts made to 'collect' this ethnic minority woman through this moulding process. Although she is often trapped in her employment, the character herself cannot be pinned down or grasped, even by the narrator who names her. Averis argues that the symbolic naming of women by an anonymous male narrator in *Les aubes* means that their 'identities become defined in relation to the male narrator in an illustration of the defining and hierarchising power of patriarchal law'.[237] For Do, the reference to the 'dead season' suggests that she has chosen the company of her abandoned *Jumeau* over that of the people around her.[238] Yet 'Mortesaison' differs from all the other symbolic names both in this novel and in *Calomnies* as it includes within it the possibility for transformation. Whilst her first encounter with the narrator occurs during the off-season and when she is working for and still haunted by Pygmalion figures who drain her vitality, there is hope for a change in season and new life. Through this allusion to Mortesaison's potential metamorphosis Lê conveys the mutable and unstable nature of subjectivity and thus undermines the racist and sexist fetishisation of this ethnic minority woman by characters like Ragot and, as a result, 'the defining and hierarchising power of patriarchal law'.[239]

Mortesaison's mysterious and ungraspable nature is also visible in the way she disappears from the narrator's apartment without him noticing or does not appear in photos.[240] This feminine incorporeality, which Averis argues forms part of Lê's resistance to gender norms in *Les aubes* and *In memoriam*, is also emphasised in the way Mortesaison's body is never described in

[236] Ibid. p.193.
[237] Averis (2018), p.34.
[238] Do (2005), p.187.
[239] Averis (2018), p.34.
[240] Lê (1995), pp.56, 57.

the novel and remains indiscernible in her large black coat, scarf and hat.[241] Here, Lê rejects the fetishising exotification and sexualisation of Mortesaison's body of which Ragot is guilty and which is used to justify an oppressive moulding process. Mortesaison's behaviour as well as body is portrayed as elusive through the implicit but unconfirmed suggestion that she intentionally drives the Maya agency clients who try to control her writing mad: leading them to kill one another or commit suicide.[242] Likewise, reference to her black hat as she waits for *le Jumeau* implies that she may be the mysterious 'tueur au chapeau noir', whose appearance in the 'fait divers' she has been avidly following, who smothers elderly Maya Agency clients in their sleep.[243] On the one hand, this insinuation in the novel challenges any reductive production of Mortesaison as a victim lacking any agency by suggesting she might be wreaking her revenge on those who mobilise unequal power relations to mould and direct her behaviour. On the other hand, by only hinting at this as a possibility the narrative subverts the idea that Mortesaison, her identity and behaviour, can be fully known.

Stylistically, the novel also mirrors the mystery surrounding Mortesaison as the combination of a lack of punctuation and the way the narrator switches from the voice of one character to another often obscures the meaning of the text and its source. Likewise, as Roberts notes, the use of ellipses at the start of the novel challenges the idea of narratorial control and, as such, of fixed meaning.[244] Through these stylistic techniques and the depiction of Mortesaison's body and behaviour as elusive, the narrative resists re-enacting the Pygmalion-like fetishisation and intersectional moulding that Mortesaison faces at the hands of the ethnic majority French characters. As a result, this work elucidates and subverts attempts to rewrite French history to deny the inferiorisation and subjugation of ethnic minority women in the past and present through the depiction of integration as an egalitarian process that upholds universalist ideals such as *Liberté, Égalité et Fraternité*.

Re-Writing Classical Mythology to Challenge the Myths of Republican Universalism

One of Linda Lê's ambitions in her writing is to shed light on the world, especially its lies, depravity and hypocrisy.[245] The intertextuality that Lê creates with the Pygmalion myth in *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot* reflects this desire as she employs it as a tool to develop an intersectional feminist

[241] Ibid. pp.56, 59, 131-33; Averis (2018), p.33.
[242] See, for example, Lê (1995), p.115.
[243] Ibid. pp.183, 93.
[244] Roberts (2003), p.336.
[245] Landrot (2010); Barnes (2008), p.54.

consciousness of the violence, marginalisation and inequality experienced by ethnic minority women in France. In particular, it illuminates the treacherous nature of republican universalism when the notion of integration is employed to oppressively mould ethnic minority women towards silence and immobility in French society through duplicitous promises of universal freedom, equality or fraternity. In this way, she reveals how the discourses and practices of republican universalism and integration are implicated in the inegalitarian disciplinary mechanisms of intersectional power relations and thus function as oppressive Pygmalion-like moulding tools. This remains the case even though the male characters' attitudes towards integration differ as, whether they desire its erasure or commodifying promotion, they mark her indelibly with essentialised gender and ethnic differences. As such, the novels demonstrate that discrimination against minorities and unequal power relations are the main source of division in French society, rather than cultural differences. Through her use of imagery, allegory and mirroring, Linda Lê also conveys the historical links between the appropriation and exploitation of colonised women through the assimilationist *mission civilisatrice* and the modern-day inferiorisation and moulding of ethnic minority women in France through republican universalist integration discourses and practices.

The proliferation of relationships, both personal and professional, in which white French men, and sometimes women, attempt to direct the niece and Mortesaison towards the ideal Galatea as submissive, silent and immobile exposes the 'unity of the structure' oppressing these ethnic minority women.[246] Thus these relationships can be seen as microcosms of social power in a patriarchal, ethnocentric French society which reveal how racism and sexism intersect to present white masculinity as inherently superior and deny ethnic minority women freedom and independence from exploitation and marginalisation.[247] Further, by focusing on the experiences of female Vietnamese immigrants and depicting their agency, Lê gives a voice to women whose experiences remain marginalised and whose agency is often denied through portrayals that focus on victimhood.[248] Indeed, even within intersectional postcolonial research the experiences of Vietnamese women are often overlooked because the discrimination and inequalities faced by immigrants with Asian origins are assumed to be less significant than those faced by women with North or sub-Saharan African origins.[249]

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[246] Frye (1983), p.8.
[247] Hallstead states that 'our most intimate relationships can be microcosms of our social power' Hallstead (2013), p.76.
[248] See Nouria Oualia, 'Les télévisions francophones et l'image des femmes immigrées', *Annuaire de l'Afrique du nord,* 34 (1995); Referenced in Raissiguier (2010), p.77.
[249] See Kleppinger and Reeck (2018).

By returning to the Pygmalion myth in *Les dits d'un idiot*, Lê also reveals how the integration process can allow those most privileged in society to take advantage of ethnic minority women's precarious socio-economic position to reinforce their power over them and to produce them as willful objects of abjection when they actively or unconsciously defy them. The complex picture of the Pygmalion paradigm that Lê offers is extended in her portrayal of how the niece and Mortesaison internalise inferiorising discourses and the negative mental as well as socio-economic impact this has on them. These women become complicit in unequal power relations and, therefore, their own oppression, including in some of their attempts at resistance. Lê thus rejects a reductive victim narrative or resistance/complicity binary to underline their simultaneity and shed light on a significant aspect of oppression's reproductive tendencies.[250] Yet the intersectional feminist consciousness gained by the niece and the novels' open-endings convey the hope that she and Mortesaison will be able to forge new paths that resist oppressive moulding. Hope is also to be found in the way the narratives themselves refuse to collect and mould the protagonists in the same way as the French characters as a result of their racism and sexism.

Just as Lê creates intertextuality with classical mythology in her novel *Les trois parques* in order to 'atteindre une dimension presque universelle', so the links to the Pygmalion myth in these two novels highlight the universal nature of these ethnic minority female characters' experiences.[251] In this vein, Lê simultaneously undermines the marginalisation of these women or their experiences and reveals how we can learn about the functioning of power relations and inequality more generally through examining these narratives. Furthermore, Lê's own adaptation of a canonical Western text to achieve this can be seen as part of the overall subversive nature of her writing. In the same way that Lê sees herself as a Pygmalion figure in relation to the French language, which she reinvents and moulds in each of her works, she moulds this myth for her own purposes.[252] Rather than focusing upon and glorifying Pygmalion's creative skill and superiority, she highlights, often through hyperbolic imagery and a caustic tone, the violence and vulnerability of these men because of their thirst for power and a sense of superiority, and the continuity with the country's colonial past. More significantly, Lê gives a voice to and depicts the experiences of modern-day Galateas when this character was silenced and objectified in the original myth. Lê thus re-writes classical mythology, often claimed as the heritage of Western civilisations, to undermine both the narrative that French society enacts republican universalist values and the related civilisation/barbarism dichotomy that justifies the subjugation of others. Ultimately,

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[250] Pyke (2010), p.564.
[251] Catherine Argand, 'Linda Lê', (L'express: 1999) <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/linda-le_803102.html >.
[252] Ibid.

adopting an intersectional lens to analyse the intertextuality of Lê's works with the Pygmalion myth reveals the oppressive moulding discourses meant to immobilise and silence ethnic minority women in French society and how they, and the intersecting power relations they perpetuate, can exist through, rather than in spite of, republican universalist integration discourses. In other words, the real mythology which Lê explores in these novels is not that of Pygmalion and Galatea but of republican universalism and integration. Having challenged the myth of the abstract citizen when republican universalism is conceived as a gendered and racialised particularism, she exposes, firstly, the related myth-making involved in portraying French society as egalitarian and, secondly, how this mythologisation means that universalist ideals, including integration, can be employed to erode, rather than enact, the promises of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* in modern French society.

Chapter Three – A Quest for Equality: Marie NDiaye's *En famille* and the Oppressive Directionality of Republican Universalism

The (In)Compatibility between Republican Universalism and Intersectional Oppression

In the period leading up to Marie NDiaye's publication of *En famille* in 1990, integration was considered fundamental to republican universalism and the promotion and protection of its core values of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.[1] In particular, it was meant to facilitate the active and equal participation of all French citizens in society, including French nationals with one or more foreign parents, like the female protagonist of *En famille*. Beyond equality before the law for individuals abstracted from identitarian affiliations, elements deemed key to this process included a strong sense of national identity, founded upon republican universalist values, and reciprocal rights and duties shared equally by all citizens.[2] Furthermore, as explored in the introduction and previous chapter, many believed that the assimilation of French cultural practices as well as republican values was a necessary part of the integration process for foreigners or their children.[3] In *En famille*, NDiaye explores many of these themes through her protagonist Fanny's attempt to tackle the marginalisation that she faces within her own ethnic majority family. This chapter demonstrates how the novel portrays the laws, reciprocal rights and duties, and strong sense of national identity outlined above as a potential barrier to Fanny being treated equally and with dignity in French society. Indeed, it explores how they form part of a range of intersectional mechanisms through which a racialised and gendered socio-economic hierarchy is maintained. By applying the intersectional theoretical framework based on Sara Ahmed's concept of directionality and Marilyn Frye's understanding of oppression adopted in the previous chapter, it therefore exposes how republican universalist practices and discourses related to integration are employed to restrictively direct this ethnic minority female character.[4] Additionally, this elucidates how the literary tools that Marie NDiaye employs in this text stimulate an

[1] See Long (1988); Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991).
[2] Long (1988); Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991). This is analysed by Amiraux (2010); Jennings (2000).
[3] See also d'Appolonia (2009).
[4] For a more in-depth outline of these concepts and framework please see Chapter Two.

intersectional feminist consciousness of not only the racism and sexism which Fanny faces but how these can be channelled through universalist discourses.

En famille, most often told from Fanny's perspective, depicts the protagonist's quixotic quest to '[s]e réintégrer à la famille' which marginalises her as an outsider.[5] Naively believing that this is the result of a lapse in family tradition, namely her Aunt Léda's absence from the celebration of her birth, she sets out to find and reunite Léda with the family. However, the family blame Fanny for her own exclusion with reference to not only her alleged failure to fulfil her familial duties but also her supposed 'singularité'. Although the family superficially respects abstraction, Fanny's 'singularité' is implicitly linked to her father's foreign origins which are evidenced through references to geographical and cultural differences.[6] Yet Fanny continues to seek out Léda and repeatedly experiences exploitation and marginalisation as she advances this quest, including in her work as an unpaid cook and a prostitute, and when she is denied citizenship in her family's village. Her desire for integration also makes her more vulnerable to violence as she is raped by multiple men from whom she seeks information about Léda, including her uncle, and leads to her complicity in this as she herself abuses other minorities who she believes threaten her integration. Yet, in spite of these efforts and two fantastic metamorphoses which are meant to make her more like her white family, her quest fails because the integration as an equal which she seeks is made impossible by intersectional discrimination and power relations.

Previous research on *En famille* has demonstrated how Fanny is excluded by her family and, by extension, French society and how this is imbricated in the identity construction of the French nation.[7] Analyses of the language used in this exclusionary process, particularly the periphrasis in relation to Fanny's 'difference', have revealed how colour-blindness is superficially respected but not enacted by the French ethnic majority characters.[8] Furthermore, scholars have identified the link between Fanny's behaviour, particularly her first metamorphosis, and the process of assimilation or integration in France.[9] This chapter builds on this body of research by

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[5] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.153.
[6] Ibid. p.151. The father's hot, arid village is contrasted with that of the mother's family, identical to many others: ibid. pp.39-40, 49.
[7] See, for example, Alexander Hertich, 'The Search for Place and Identity in Marie NDiaye's *En famille*', *French Review,* 78:4 (2005); Lydie Moudileno, 'Délits, détours et affabulation : l'écriture de l'anathème dans En famille de Marie NDiaye', *The French Review,* 71:3 (1998); Dominique Rabaté, '« Où est ma famille ? » : la violente étrangeté de Marie NDiaye', in *Le roman français au tournant du XXIe siècle,* ed. by B. Blanckman, A. Mura-Brunel, and M. Dambre (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2004).
[8] See Behar (2013); Brendlé (2017); Sarah Burnautzki, 'Jeux de visibilité et d'invisibilité : la production romanesque de Marie NDiaye à la lumière de la crise du républicanisme français', in *Une femme puissante,* ed. by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).
[9] See Asibong (2013); Bujor, (2018); Hertich (2005).

exploring how a variety of discourses and practices associated with republican universalism and integration, such as reciprocal rights and duties, worthiness or the promises of freedom, equality and fraternity, function within the narrative. This illuminates not only how universalist ideals are obstructed by intersectional discrimination and inequality but also how the ethnic majority characters employ these universalist discourses to mask and perpetuate this oppression and marginalisation, rather than liberation, of the ethnic minority female protagonist.

The first section, with reference to Frye's conception of oppression, examines imagery of imprisonment and dirtiness. This highlights how marking Fanny with gender and ethnic difference is accompanied by attempts to immobilise and silence her in French society and that this process is a legacy of the nation's colonial past.[10] Considering NDiaye's novel in relation to Ahmed's concept of directionality illuminates how this is achieved through the creation of expectations, shaped by the intersections of racism, sexism and classism, about how Fanny ought to think and behave.[11] Further, this reveals how the promise or hope of equality and acceptance through integration perpetuates and masks the oppressive directionality of these discourses and their negative impact on ethnic minority women. The second section turns to the novel's subversion of the fiction/reality dichotomy in relation to republican universalism. Through intertextuality with Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, NDiaye depicts how concepts integral to contemporary integration discourse, such as worthiness and reciprocal rights and duties, are employed deceptively to suggest that universalist ideals are upheld. In turn, the novel exposes how they are in fact mobilised to simultaneously reproduce unjust socio-economic hierarchies and deny their existence. The analysis then considers the self-perpetuating nature of this process, as portrayed through Fanny's internalisation of inferiorising and exclusionary discourses and the challenges this creates for undermining or escaping this process. In this way, this chapter argues that NDiaye's novel brings to light how violence can be concealed and perpetuated through universalist integration discourses and the implications for ethnic minority women in French society.

The Intersectional and Imprisoning Mechanisms of Ethnicity and Gender

En famille begins with the eighteen year-old protagonist's arrival at her grandmother's French village and the inexplicable failure of her family and their dogs to recognise her. When her uncle does not invite the protagonist in to join the celebration of her grandmother's birthday, she remains stuck outside behind forbidding metal railings guarded by the dogs. She is only admitted

[10] See Frye (1983).
[11] See Ahmed (2010).

into the house after she accepts the first name occurring to her Aunt Colette, Fanny. Fanny then attempts to enlist her family's help to locate her Aunt Léda who, estranged from the family, was absent at the family's celebration of her birth. Fanny explains that Léda's absence eighteen years earlier constitutes a failure in family tradition which accounts for their general treatment of her as 'au mieux un élément toléré' whose 'droits étaient limités'.[12] Fanny's marginalisation within the family and the inequality she faces are thus brought to the fore right at the start of the novel. The resulting quest upon which Fanny embarks can be seen to resemble the republican universalist process of integration outlined by the *Haut Conseil à l'intégration*. Like Fanny's presentation of her quest, the HCI conceived integration practice and policy as a means to demarginalise those who are 'laissés-pour-compte' in France, including ethnic minority French nationals, and thereby promote an egalitarian society.[13] This overlap is evident throughout the novel as notions of reciprocal rights and duties and deservingness, prominent in integration discourses and policies, shape Fanny's behaviour and that of her family and French society.

Fanny's expedition also bears similarities with the adventures portrayed in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha,* as Andrew Asibong and Alexander Hertich have noted.[14] Just as Don Quijote seeks renown as a knight-errant, Fanny sets out in the hope of improving her reputation in her family such that she is acknowledged and accepted by them and does so with the aid of her own Sancho Panza, Colette's son Eugène. Additionally, both Don Quijote and Fanny take on new names, although NDiaye highlights the difference in their social positions through the way that Fanny does not choose but instead has her new name imposed upon her by her family. Fanny is never given a surname that would afford her the same explicit geographical rootedness conveyed through Quijote's addition of 'de la Mancha' to his name. The intertextual links that NDiaye creates with *Don Quijote* thus foreshadow the ultimate failure of Fanny's own quest as she never gains the acceptance and grounded sense of identity she desires in either her family or France.

Another similarity worthy of further analysis is the emphasis placed upon justice in both tales. One of the main motivating factors for Cervantes' aspiring chivalric knight is 'deshaciendo todo género de agravio' (righting every kind of wrong) and behaving 'en pro de los menesterosos' (in favour of the needy).[15] Furthermore, these actions are all 'para el servicio de su república' (in

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[12] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.15.
[13] See Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991), p.14.
[14] See Andrew Asibong, 'Marie NDiaye et le rire blanc', *Rires en francophonie,* (2013); Andrew Asibong, 'Moja Sestra', in *Transmissions: Essays in French Thought, Literature and Cinema,* ed. by Isabelle McNeill and Bradley Stephens (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); Hertich (2005); Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, (Kindle ebook: Librodot, 2012). Herein referred to as *Don Quijote*.
[15] Cervantes Saavedra (2012), pp.606, 842. Subsequently referred to as *Don Quijote*. My translation.

the service of his republic).[16] Likewise, Fanny wishes to right the wrongs of her family, although it is she who has been wronged. She hopes that her efforts to integrate will end the marginalisation she faces and transform her life from 'une existence dont la ligne, dès le début, avait été déformée, tordue par la paresse et l'oubli'.[17] She paints the unequal treatment she receives as a form of restrictive directionality as her path has been warped, and made more difficult, in comparison to those of the rest of the family. As such, she faces the kinds of barriers or walls that Ahmed argues are created to oppressively (re)direct certain people in society.[18] Fanny also signals that the family's laziness and forgetfulness have played an important role in directing her along this twisted path. Calling for the enactment of the universalist egalitarian values of the Republic for all citizens, as well as for all members of the family, is therefore central to Fanny's quest to overcome the ways in which her French family direct as well as exclude her.

The implicit intertextuality that NDiaye creates with *Don Quijote* also locates her exploration of the theme of justice within a universal framework. Hertich notes that the 'theme of the quest, because of its overuse, has passed from a simple trope to what one could classify as a "mythology" of literature'.[19] As a result, he proposes that Fanny's experiences as a teenager with a 'dysfunctional family' become amalgamated with other questers who form part of the novel's literary heritage.[20] Similarly, Sarah Burnautzki exposes how *En famille* mimics the fairy-tale *Sleeping Beauty* and notes that the engagement with fairy-tales which have a universal tenor means Fanny's expedition exceeds 'l'expérience individuelle de la protagoniste et élargi[t] la portée significative de son aventure à l'humanité entière'.[21] As the novel's intertextuality with *Don Quijote* underlines equality as well as identity as a central theme, this mythologisation locates Fanny's quest as an ethnic minority woman within a more universal fight for justice for those who are marginalised. Analysing the novel can thereby shed light not only on Fanny's experiences but also on the general power relations against which she struggles for the freedom to take her own path, be treated equally, and accepted with fraternity within her own family and nation.

Although Fanny believes, or tries to believe, that unfulfilled family traditions at her birth are the source of her family's hostility towards her, the novel proves this is false. Instead, it is implicitly linked throughout the narrative with, firstly, her father's foreign origins and, secondly,

[16] Ibid.
[17] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.19.
[18] Ahmed (2017), p.136.
[19] Hertich (2005), p.723.
[20] Ibid. pp.722-23.
[21] Burnautzki (2013), p.147.

her gender.[22] Previous research has proposed that the hot and arid climate of Fanny's father's village most likely suggests that he is from Africa whilst NDiaye's implicit rather than explicit references to his foreign origins upholds universalist abstraction by not reductively stereotyping her protagonist.[23] Examining the power relations at work in the novel reveals how, even as NDiaye respects abstraction, the author illustrates how Fanny's oppression is linked not to her Aunt Léda but to the way an ethnocentric patriarchal society genders and racialises her. In particular, analysing the imagery of imprisonment and walls that NDiaye creates highlights how Fanny's experiences within her family and French society are interwoven and, consequently, the structural nature of the inequalities she faces. In order to achieve this, I will now examine Fanny's experiences as cook in a village café which often directly or inversely mirror, and can therefore elucidate, her relationship with her family.

After making several stops on her journey and encountering a couple who claim to have known Léda, Fanny follows their directions to an unnamed village in which they believe Léda now resides. However, she is now on her own and desperately short of money because her cousin Eugène has abandoned her and taken the remainder of the cash they had both contributed towards the quest. When the waitress at the local café, the *Coq Hardi*, complains about also having to cook, Fanny offers to take on this role in exchange for food and lodging.[24] She hopes that, by volunteering and gaining favour with her new colleague Lucette and other villagers, they may lead her to Léda and so aid her integration as an equal member of her white French family.[25] However, this role symbolically imprisons Fanny as she descends, guided from above by Lucette, into a dark, filthy kitchen with a suffocating smell. There is only one small basement window 'protégé de barreaux' through which Fanny glimpses the feet of passers-by and a dog that, as though guarding her prison, growls at her as she works.[26] Her terms of work are equally restrictive: working from 7am to 11pm with only one break she is overwhelmed by Lucette's tyrannical demands and struggles to leave the kitchen or even eat.[27]

Similar prison-like imagery is repeated in a later scene after Fanny has been formally expelled from the family and also excluded from the local hotel because its staff members are influenced by the family's distrust of her. Desperate to stay in the village to find Léda and a way to

[22] See contrasting images of white French family's village and appearance and that of Fanny and her father: NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.39-40, 49, 153. Previous research revealing this racialisation: Asibong (2013). Behar (2013).
[23] See Nora Cotille-Foley, 'Les mots pour ne pas le dire', in *Marie NDiaye : l'étrangeté à l'œuvre,* ed. by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2009).
[24] The implications of Fanny being employed illegally are discussed later in this section.
[25] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.71.
[26] Ibid. pp.75-76, 82-83.
[27] Ibid. pp.74, 86.

be accepted, Fanny sneaks into her deceased grandmother's house, inherited by Eugène, and hides in a space under the stairs occupied by the dogs in winter: 'il lui était impossible de déplier ses bras, ses jambes, ou de relever la tête; elle écrasa quelques puces qui l'avaient mordu pendant la nuit'.[28] Fanny's socio-economic immobility as a penniless unpaid cook becomes a physical confinement as an excluded family member in another filthy space with a nauseating smell. This cage is also guarded as, when she dares to emerge after overhearing someone call Léda's name, she is mauled to death by Eugène's dog that he has named after his estranged aunt. The overlap in these two images conveys the similarities between how Fanny is treated by her family and at the café. The name *Coq Hardi*, common for cafés, pubs and restaurants throughout France, also indicates that these experiences form part of a larger picture. Since the Revolution, the cockerel has often been seen to represent the French people whilst its association with French mobilisation during World War I led to it becoming 'the symbol of a France sprung from peasant origins, proud, opinionated, courageous and prolific'.[29] NDiaye's choice of a name that evokes the Republic and rural French identity suggests that the *Coq Hardi*, and the family to which she implicitly links it through mirroring, can be seen as microcosms of the French nation. In other words, as Chloé Brendlé notes, 'histoires de famille et récit national se conjuguent dans une même interrogation sur la communauté'.[30] As a result, NDiaye's portrayal of Fanny's experiences at the café and also in her family can elucidate nation-wide issues and how they are imbricated in daily life.

In turn, this reveals that Fanny's experiences are not incidental but arise from the kind of systemic power structures which Frye argues intersect to imprison and oppress women: 'The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction'.[31] Throughout *En famille*, NDiaye offers clues to how various discourses and socio-economic barriers coalesce to immobilise Fanny in this way, including in her work as a cook at the *Coq Hardi*. One of the reasons why ethnic minority female characters like Fanny and the woman who later replaces her, who comes from her father's village, end up and become trapped in the role as cook is Lucette's belief that such work is beneath her. Her pride means that she feels a sense of shame at carrying out this role, particularly in relation to the

[28] Ibid. p.179.
[29] Ministère de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères, 'Symbols of the Republic: The Gallic Rooster', *France Diplomacy,* (11/02/2016) <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/symbols-of-the-republic/article/the-gallic-rooster> [accessed 04/09/2020].
[30] Brendlé, (2017) p.237.
[31] Frye (1983), p.4.

grease making her clothes smell, and describes it as 'si peu en rapport avec ce pour quoi je suis faite'.[32] Consequently, she not only passes on her undesired duties to Fanny but also refuses to go anywhere near the kitchen. When Fanny cannot, as a result, hear the orders and serves the wrong meal, Lucette then contemptuously kicks the dishes back down the stairs. Similarly, when Fanny dares to leave the kitchen to watch Lucette and the customers, it is Fanny herself who Lucette shoves back down towards the kitchen. Fanny believes that the disdain for her that this and other behaviour demonstrates arises from the fact that she takes on 'une tâche qui la dégoûte', as though she could be contaminated by association with a role deemed inferior.[33]

However, Lucette's derisory attitude towards Fanny begins before she volunteers, evidenced in the way she ignores her as a client and kicks the leg of her chair to wake her, and therefore appears linked to her first impressions of Fanny and, most likely, her appearance. [34] This hostility can be related to the way Lucette and the *patronne* treat Fanny as an outsider and how they laugh at Fanny for stating that she has family in the region because of 'des nombreuses particularités inhérentes à la silhouette, au langage, à la forme de l'esprit de Fanny'.[35] While Lucette's vocabulary appears neutral, considering this style of speech and writing in relation to her contemptuous behaviour towards Fanny exposes the violence concealed within it. Clarisse Behar demonstrates that the family's use of similar euphemistic terms, like 'particularité' and 'singularité', is indicative of their racialisation of Fanny and, as a result, of the 'neo-racial nationalism' espoused by the ethnic majority.[36] Similarly, Brendlé argues that this is one of the discursive techniques forming a 'discours en creux' through which NDiaye, as explored in Chapter One in relation to phrases like 'les gens comme vous' in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, conveys the existence of stigmatisation and how it is masked through politically correct discourse.[37] In other words, Lucette's periphrasistic phrase 'particularités inhérentes' is the vehicle for simultaneously expressing and concealing her racism in a way that appears to respect the difference-blind policy of republican universalism. NDiaye therefore reveals that it is through supposedly universalist discourses that Lucette constructs Fanny as embodying an ethnic difference that excludes her from the nation and conceives herself as inherently superior as a white French woman.

The inferiorisation and exclusion of Fanny occurs in spite of the fact that she is a French national brought up with French customs. Fanny is raised by her French mother in France and, when undertaking the role as cook, she demonstrates perfect knowledge of the local recipes that

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[32] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.71.
[33] Ibid. p.74.
[34] Ibid. pp.67-68.
[35] Ibid. pp.76-77, 87.
[36] Behar (2013), p.127.
[37] Brendlé (2017), p.54.

have been passed down to her through her grandmother. The fact that Lucette and the *patronne* continue to treat Fanny as a stranger in spite of her in-depth knowledge of regional recipes highlights that cultural customs or their assimilation are not the main source of division, as often contended in integration discourses and policies at the time the novel was written and even in recent times.[38] Instead, the problems Fanny faces arise from her racialisation by the white ethnic majority in France as, in Asibong's words, 'irreducibly, essentially, biologically different'.[39]

NDiaye emphasises the link between this discrimination and inequality as Lucette's belief that the cook's role is beneath her leads to Fanny and other ethnic minority women taking on undervalued positions whilst Lucette adopts the waitressing role she finds more glamorous. This reflects research findings that ethnic minority women in France are 'victims of both racial and gendered discrimination in their access to the labour market' as they are relegated to more undervalued, exploitative and precarious positions than white French women.[40] The way Fanny repeatedly ends up in undervalued posts more often carried out by women, including another hospitality role, an aunt's domestic work, and prostitution, signals that Fanny's experiences are shaped by sexism as well as racism. In the case of the *Coq Hardi*, the *patronne* and Lucette take advantage of Fanny's precarious financial situation, the result of the sexism and racism she faces from her family, to employ her illegally and not remunerate her for her work. As a result, Fanny ends up not only taking on but also being caught in an unvalued and highly exploitative role. Lucette's adoption of 'un air d'aimable supériorité qui l'éloignait encore davantage de Fanny' once Fanny becomes cook also conveys how this reinforces her sense of superiority within a racialised and gendered socio-economic hierarchy.[41] This reassurance in the superiority of her position as well as identity, as she sits on 'sa chaise de predilection d'où elle dominait la salle', leads Lucette to treat Fanny with condescension as well as hostility.[42] In this vein, Lucette's cockerel-like pride as a white French woman, and by extension the pride of an ethnocentric nation, is bolstered through her inferiorisation of others.

NDiaye's repeated references to the dirtiness of the kitchen and Fanny's hiding-place, and Lucette's fear of becoming dirty, also stress the self-perpetuating nature of inferiorising discourses and the inequalities related to them. This theme and the discourses related to it are reminiscent of the racist trope associating blackness with dirtiness and inferiority that, in the past, depicted black slaves as naturally 'fit' for an inferior place in society and specific socio-economic

[38] Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991); Long (1988).
[39] Asibong (2007), p.103.
[40] Freedman (2004), p.121.
[41] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.73.
[42] Ibid.

roles.[43] The *patronne*'s treatment of Fanny before she accepts her as cook illuminates the intersection of racism, sexism and exploitation and how it is a postcolonial legacy of such stigmatising discourses. The way she examines Fanny's body, even prodding her lower back, evokes images of African women sold into slavery, often by French traders and owners, and also of mass recruitment procedures of immigrants from France's former North African colonies during the *Trentes glorieuses*.[44] Fanny's association of the *patronne*'s acceptance of her as cook with being 'possédée' reinforces this implicit comparison with slavery in particular.[45] This scene is also mirrored when Fanny unknowingly enters a brothel and her exotic appearance is judged advantageous for prostitution. The idea that Fanny is 'possessed' by the *patronne*, is given more explicitly exploitative and abusive connotations in this second scene and also as Fanny is raped on multiple occasions, including by her Uncle Georges. In her intersectional analysis of black women's experiences in the U.S., Angela Davis argues that the rape of black female slaves was institutionalised not simply because of white male desire but because it was an expression and technique of racial domination.[46] Similarly, Fanny's experiences as a cook, prostitute and rape victim who is 'possessed' by her employers and abusers suggest that sexual exploitation and violence arise from and reproduce Fanny's socio-economic inferiorisation in French society. The scene with the *patronne* thus highlights the persistence of unequal power relations as the social group that enslaved and economically and sexually exploited African women and other colonised populations in the past depicts this postcolonial ethnic minority female character as fit for an inferior socio-economic position.[47] As a result of this continuity, Fanny is oppressed in relation to how she is marked with gender and racial difference and this makes her vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in modern France.

NDiaye also draws attention to the directionality of these power relations through the theme of filth. Although dirtiness is seen as a sign of inferiority, it is as a result of her marginalisation that Fanny ends up in positions in which she becomes physically dirty: she begins to smell like the kitchen in which Lucette believes she belongs; she is bitten by the dogs' fleas because she is in the only place she can occupy in the family house after her exclusion; and her face is left 'dégouttant de jus douceâtre' when her family pelt her with rotten plums to drive her out of the village.[48] Moreover, Lucette complains about Fanny's smell but hides her suitcase which would allow Fanny to change and clean her clothes and remove the greasy smell from the kitchen.

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[43] See Fanon (1952), pp.88, 152; Guillaumin (1995), p.141.
[44] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.77; See Yamina Benguigui, 'Mémoires d'immigrés : l'héritage maghrébin', (TFI Video, 2011).
[45] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.77.
[46] Davis (1982), p.19.
[47] Ahmed (2017), p.46.
[48] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.162.

As with Nadia's encounter with the stranger in *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, the metaphorical filthiness he speaks of is imposed upon her when he spits on her. NDiaye therefore challenges the idea that physical filthiness is the cause of Fanny's marginalisation by depicting how it is the result or part of this process. Moreover, the author exposes how this process is self-perpetuating as this argument is used to justify the discrimination Fanny faces and the precarious socio-economic position it entrenches: firstly directing her onto and then keeping her on an inferior path.

NDiaye emphasises this circularity through the fantastic nature of Fanny's quest and journey. As Fanny travels between different villages in France to find Léda, any normal sense of topography seems to dissolve. Firstly, the villages appear identical: 'Le village de Tante Colette ressemblait tant aux agglomérations voisines que Fanny crut n'avoir, en réalité, jamais bougé'.[49] Secondly, both distance and time appear unstable: 'Elle ne trouvait plus anormal que l'autocar traversât précisément le village de l'aïeule alors qu'elle avait pensé s'éloigner dans la direction opposée'.[50] These examples reinforce, as has been noted by Flavia Bujor and Pierre Richard, the fact that Fanny's quest to find her Aunt Léda and be accepted by the family is a failure.[51] Each time she thinks she is closer to finding Léda she ends up back at the same starting position with no clue where to begin. Further, her progression is often hampered by her family as they deny knowledge of Léda's whereabouts or even lie about them.[52] For this reason, any sense of advancing on this quest 'ne serait donc qu'un leurre, il ne ferait que recouvrir la loi d'une immobilité'.[53] In light of the various techniques, including intertextuality and imagery of imprisonment, that NDiaye uses to identify Fanny's quest as seeking equality as well as belonging, this circular (im)mobility also illustrates how the justice she seeks remains out of grasp. This fantastic topography thus highlights the restrictive directionality which immobilises her as an ethnic minority woman in French society and the self-perpetuating nature of this oppression.

Fanny's family also directs her onto an oppressive path because of her supposedly inferior gender and origins. This is particularly evident when, because Fanny is still determined to be reintegrated into the family and even to marry Eugène to achieve this, Colette formally expels Fanny from the family and lectures her on the justification for this. One of the statements that she makes is that the family expects Fanny to be less intelligent than her male cousin Eugène and less beautiful than her female cousins.[54] The important role played by women in *En famille* in

[49] Ibid. p.121.
[50] Ibid. p.47.
[51] See Bujor, (2018); Jean-Pierre Richard, 'Le trouble et le partage', in *Terrains de lecture,* ed. by Jean-Pierre Richard (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).
[52] See NDiaye (1990/2007), p.249.
[53] Richard (1996), p.171.
[54] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.154.

managing their families has been cited as evidence that traditional patriarchal laws have been overcome in the novel.[55] However, although they play an important role in directing Fanny's behaviour, the emphasis on male intelligence and female beauty within the family reflects their espousal of traditional gender norms that oppress women. In her analysis of the construction of the nation and its image, Nira Yuval-Davis argues that women often engage in the role of 'cultural reproducers of the nation', policing the behaviour of other women, because it is 'the main source of social power allowed to women'.[56] *En famille*'s seemingly powerful female figures accept and reinforce the subordinate role of women and the privilege of men in the family, for example, the grandmother leaves her house to Eugène rather than her daughters or granddaughters. This is also evident in Eugène's dream to be an important business manager: 'Eugène rêvait d'une poste important, d'un vaste bureau pour lui seul d'où il dirigerait quelques dizaines de personnes'.[57] Even though Eugène is depicted as lazy and less intelligent than Fanny, his right to such a role in which he can direct others is never challenged and his sense of entitlement is underlined by his refusal to carry out the work necessary to obtain it.[58] Further, Eugène's family go out of their way to help him reach his goal whereas Fanny, who excelled at school, is relegated to undervalued positions. Indeed, the novel ends not with Fanny's demise but with Colette's final attempt to gain her undeserving son such a position. In this way, NDiaye conveys, firstly, the centrality of gender-based discrimination and inequalities to Fanny's experience of marginalisation as an ethnic minority woman and, secondly, how the privileges men gain through this are perpetuated by society as a whole.

Fanny notices such inequalities when caring for an uncle in exchange for lodgings: 'Quant à son oncle, il critiqua vertement le soupe qu'elle avait préparée pour le dîner. Ainsi avait-il dû se comporter avec Tante Clémence'.[59] Fanny's realisation that her uncle's behaviour probably forms a pattern indicates that the gendered role of housewife occupied by many women in the family is, like that of a cook in a dingy café, unvalued. In her analysis of NDiaye's *œuvre*, Katherine Roussos demonstrates how the author employs magic realism to depict and undermine 'le chômage des mères, qui continue à les enfermer dans la sphère domestique'.[60] Although NDiaye does not make use of magic realism in this particular example, she nevertheless reveals how women are not only

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[55] See Colette Sarrey-Strack, *Fictions contemporaines au féminin : Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Ndiaye, Marie Nimier, Marie Redonnet*, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2002); Michael Sheringham, 'The Law of Sacrifice: Race and Family in Marie NDiaye's En Famille and Papa doit manger', in *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory,* ed. by Marie-Claire Barnet and Edward Welch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p.28.
[56] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.37.
[57] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.23-24.
[58] Ibid. pp.23, 311.
[59] Ibid. p.271.
[60] Roussos (2007), p.111.

relegated to the domestic sphere but also confined within it because of their resulting financial dependence on their husbands. For example, when Georges elopes with another woman during one of his many extramarital affairs, Colette is forced to live with and rely upon her son Eugène, who sees and treats her as a burden. NDiaye further signals how women are assigned to and trapped within subordinate positions in French society through Colette's comparison of Fanny's beauty, rather than intelligence, to that of her female cousins. As with relegation to precarious domestic work, this emphasis exposes how women's value is based on their ability to please men and (so) support male domination, rather than having successful or fulfilling careers that might challenge the patriarchy. As beauty is seen as integral to a woman's socio-economic success, the family's anger that Fanny is seen as more beautiful than her cousins reflects not only how she is gendered but how, as a result of her origins, they assign her an even more inferior position than other female members of the family. Fanny's desire not just to marry but to 'devenir Eugène lui-même', rather than any of her female cousins, is therefore unsurprising and stresses how the barriers she faces to equality are intersectional and based on both her sex and ethnicity.[61]

Fanny's attempt to seduce Eugène is one of the topics that Colette raises during her formal castigation and expulsion. Colette chastises her niece for seeking to marry Eugène and abandoning her fiancé Georges, a young man from Paris who shares her 'singularité', because it is 'où se trouvait ta place'.[62] This can be linked to Colette's earlier statement that Fanny could make up for her 'défauts' and achieve 'perfection' in the family's eyes through 'certain effacement, certaine discrétion – oserais-je dire: une parfaite insignifiance, que nous puissions, au moins, t'oublier tant soit peu'.[63] This passage expresses how Fanny's 'place' according to her family, where she is deemed to 'fit' and can be tolerated, is one of permanent inferiority. Accepting her own 'insignifiance' and the marginalisation this entails by marrying Georges would allow the family to forget her and her husband and the fact that they should be treated as equal members of the family. Further, Colette's call for Fanny's 'effacement' can be related to Ahmed's argument that the renunciation or 'reced[ing] into the background' demanded of the oppressed 'requires giving up a will other than the will of others, or learning to will what is willed by others'.[64] Thus Fanny's white French family conceives the ideal ethnic minority woman as one who, as in Lê's works, accepts her supposedly inherent inferiority because of her gender and ethnicity and subordinates her will to theirs. For this reason, they expect her to silently and unobtrusively acquiesce to the family oppressively directing her and, by extension, 'in being made invisible'.[65]

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[61] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.65.
[62] Ibid. p.155.
[63] Ibid. p.154.
[64] Ahmed (2017), p.69.
[65] Frye (1983), p.2.

This reveals that it is the family's discrimination against Fanny which forms a permanent barrier, rather than her behaviour or any cultural difference, to her acceptance as an equal and fully integrated family member. As they see Eugène, as a white French man, as Fanny's superior, her desire to marry him is interpreted as a rejection of her inferior social place and hence a pretentious abomination requiring her expulsion as abject.[66] Setting out a path of socio-economic silence, immobility and invisibility for Fanny as an ethnic minority woman is therefore used to justify violence against her; either in coercing her compliance with her subordination or through her exclusion. Through illuminating how intersectional discrimination and inequality are the greatest obstacles to Fanny's integration into her ethnic majority family, NDiaye challenges the prevalent depiction of cultural difference as the main barrier to safeguarding or creating an inclusive and egalitarian society within republican integration discourses of the early 1990s.[67]

Yet the style of Colette's rhetoric appears to contrast with her violent treatment of Fanny. Her use of elaborate phrases such as 'oserais-je dire', uncommon in day-to-day language within families, suggests a politeness usually associated with respect, whilst her behaviour, buying Fanny ice-cream and cake after she has informed her of her exclusion, seems kind and gentle. Nonetheless, just as Ahmed demonstrates that civility can mask violence, NDiaye reflects on the various ways in which violence conceals itself in literature during a speech at the 'Assisses internationales du roman' in Lyon in 2009. She explains that violence can express itself in 'un excès de délicatesse' or 'un calme incongru' and she warns readers to 'se méfier de la douceur en littérature […] C'est souvent grâce à elle que la violence cache son jeu'.[68] Similarly, Brendlé suggests that the apparent neutrality of paradoxical phrases like 'une parfaite insignifiance' is another example of the 'discours en creux' which NDiaye adopts to unveil the mechanisms of stereotyping.[69] Colette's politeness and her elaborate, well thought-out phrases and arguments can thus be identified as a tactic to mask and perpetuate the violent race and sex-based stereotypes and power relations at the heart of her discourse and behaviour. Further, as the family have no respect for Fanny, Colette's middle-class politeness is a way for her to distance herself further from Fanny through class, reinforcing Fanny's social inferiority and invisibility.

Likewise, as a cook at the *Coq Hardi*, Fanny descends the stairs to the squalid kitchen where she is expected to remain invisible. When Fanny dares to emerge from the kitchen during

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[66] For an analysis of this process in NDiaye's novel *Mon Cœur à l'étroit*, see Chapter One.
[67] See 'Abstraction and Integration' in the Introduction for analysis of this discourse. Similar assumptions about integration have also meant that previous research on *En famille* has erroneously focused on cultural difference as the main challenge Fanny faces in her quest for integration and so overlooked the role of discrimination and inequality. See Teko-Agbo (1995).
[68] NDiaye (03/11/2009); Ahmed (2017), p.62.
[69] Brendlé (2017), p.54.

opening hours, Lucette throws her down the stairs and accuses her of creating 'le désordre'.[70] As well as highlighting Fanny's socio-economic immobility, Fanny's relegation to the squalid kitchen allows the white clients, Lucette and the *patronne* to ignore her existence and the way she is overworked. Confining her downstairs and blaming her for the violence inflicted upon her when she steps out of line therefore serves both to redirect her onto the correct path and conceal the violence involved in this process. As Fanny's family and the café can often be seen as microcosms of the French nation, Lucette's behaviour reveals not only the existence of social hierarchies in French society but also the way they are reproduced through the erasure of the violence and exploitation on which they are based.

In contrast to Fanny's invisibility, Lucette's whiteness and femininity means she can be the 'face' of the café as she greets and serves the clients. This is also the case for Eugène when he is paid to advertise, and so 'vantait par sa seule image' as a white man, a DIY shop popular with the men in the family except Fanny's father.[71] The latter suggests that white masculinity is linked to an exclusionary consumerism, as both female family members and Fanny's father are neither the customers nor the representatives of this DIY shop. Although white women in the family become caught in consumerism when a supermarket opens near the village, the men are portrayed as the principle consumers. As well as consuming the fruits of other people's labour as the main customers at the *Coq hardi* and the DIY shop, they also appropriate Fanny's body as her rapists and clients when she becomes a sex-worker.[72] And whilst the services which Fanny offers as a cook, domestic worker or prostitute are unvalued and the exploitation involved is masked, the men's delight in the DIY shop conveys the value French society confers on their creative and productive capabilities through their consumption of DIY goods. In other words, the work of white French men is vaunted whereas the labour of ethnic minority women like Fanny which makes this possible is overlooked. Consequently, NDiaye portrays the consumption and appropriation of the oppressed and their labour in French society as a mechanism for the (re)production and concealment of a social hierarchy based on multiple and intersecting forms of exploitation and discrimination.[73]

Like her quest for Léda, Fanny's two fantastic metamorphoses can be seen as both an attempt to escape, and the product of, this oppressive system. As her quest fails to free her from

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[70] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.85.
[71] Ibid. pp.70, 88.
[72] Ibid. p.202.
[73] In her analysis of the industrialisation of French society after WWII, Kristin Ross demonstrates how the development of a consumerist society reduced differences between the bourgeoisie and working-classes and fostered an exclusionary understanding of national identity. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, (London: The MIT Press, 1998).

metaphorical imprisonment within a racialised body and, as Maïté Snauwaert notes, the hostile social environment she faces, a fantastic transformation is her last hope.[74] The first of these occurs after she is mauled to death by Eugène's dog: Colette discovers her in a woodland clearing and notes her new 'perfect' form as Fanny now shares 'les traits typiques des visages de notre famille' and has the same 'teinte blanchâtre' as the crocuses on which she is lying.[75] This transformation is filled with symbolism as the French word for clearing, 'clairière', and the white crocuses underscore that Fanny's skin colour has lost the darker hue linked to her fetishisation as a stranger in French society. As a symbol of resurrection and hope, NDiaye's choice of the crocus also illustrates how this fantastic metamorphosis might offer Fanny the integration as an equal she so desires.[76] In his analysis of Marie NDiaye's oeuvre, Andrew Asibong argues that these metamorphoses constitute what he describes as *blancness*. He demonstrates that the traumatic childhoods experienced by most of NDiaye's protagonists lead to a state of blankness, typified by emotional deadness, zombification, and memory blanks, and he proposes the concept of *blancness* to account for how those who are racialised go through a similar process as they attempt to 'evade this unwelcome (mis)recognition'.[77] Accordingly, Fanny's whiteness after her transformation symbolises how, by blanking out her traumatic memories of racism, she manages to erase her racialised difference in fantasy whilst her unconscious need to do so conveys the violence characterising her treatment in French society.

However, this change does not seem to last or is brought into question entirely by other characters, such as Fanny's Aunt Clémence.[78] As Asibong notes, her psychological *blancness*, like her physical whiteness, is only temporary because she is caught in an 'obsessively racializing society'.[79] The process of stranger fetishism is so relentless that Fanny can never fully deny the way she is marked, even when the story enters the realm of the fantastic. As the fantastic exemplification of Fanny's attempt to 'assimilate' into her white family and French society, her transformation indicates the impossibility of achieving freedom, equality or fraternity through integration for those who are racialised and gendered.[80] As a result of this, Fanny finds herself excluded once more and ends up becoming a prostitute in another village.[81] Her second

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[74] Maïté Snauwaert, 'Sous la peau : les mutations subjectives des personnages de Marie NDiaye', *Revue Analyses,* 11:1 (2016), pp.15-16.
[75] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.211-12.
[76] See Riklef Kandeler and Wolfram Ullrich, 'Symbolism of Plants: Examples of European-Mediterranean Culture presented with Biology and History of art: Crocus', *Journal of Experimental Botany,* (2009) <https://academic.oup.com/jxb/article/60/1/6/573757>.
[77] Asibong (2013), p.19.
[78] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.254.
[79] Asibong (2013), p.20.
[80] Hertich (2005), p.725.
[81] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.254.

transformation occurs towards the end of the narrative when Eugène, against his mother's wishes, offers to marry Fanny if she will adopt her whitened form again. Although she initially declines, Fanny is too tempted by the thought of being fully integrated into the family. However, in a cruel twist on the 'clarity' of the 'clairière' in which she is first found, she transforms into a transparent, disintegrated mass.[82] Her fate this time is to be placed in the garden shed by Colette and soon forgotten, with the family continuing on as normal as though she had never existed. In this vein, NDiaye's use of the fantastic further highlights how marking Fanny with gender and ethnic difference imprisons her within a body and life that is constantly immobilised, silenced and erased in an inegalitarian and exclusionary French society.

The outcome of Fanny's metamorphoses can be compared to Lucette's realisation that, through Fanny's wish to please her, 'Fanny, dans son empressement docile, fût son œuvre'.[83] The way in which Lucette and the family oppressively direct Fanny can also be understood as a process in which they mould her, like a sculpture, into the shape that they choose. When this is combined with Fanny's desire for equality and belonging, the outcome is Fanny's unstable new form after her first mutation and her complete disintegration after the second. Fanny's transformations in the face of an unyielding social system convey how she continues to be motivated by a promise of integration and equality that is constantly deferred. The next section explores how this promise and the discourses around integration and republican universalism facilitate her exploitation and marginalisation in French society. In particular, it expands upon Ahmed's analysis of how the notions of love, politeness and happiness can conceal violence and power to consider how republican universalist discourses contribute to the immobilisation, silencing and marginalisation of this ethnic minority female character.[84]

Universalist Discourses and the Blurring of Reality and Fiction

The previous section set out how Fanny's quest for justice and a sense of belonging in *En famille*, underlined through the intertextuality Marie NDiaye creates with *Don Quijote*, is impeded by the intersectional discrimination she faces. Another element NDiaye highlights through this intertextuality is the tenuous relationship between reality and fiction: this section demonstrates how this disparity, especially between the reality of inequality in France and the narratives around republican universalism and its ideals, further hampers the protagonist's quest. Don Quijote begins his risible quest because he has confused reality with the fiction of the chivalric tales in

[82] Ibid. p.306.
[83] Ibid. p.73.
[84] Ahmed (2017), p.62.

which he has fully immersed himself but which are centuries out of date. Furthermore, the narrator's self-aware interjections into Cervantes' story raise questions about whether Don Quijote's adventures are entirely fabricated or based on true events.[85] Likewise, Marie NDiaye rejects any clear demarcations between reality and fiction throughout the novel. Firstly, she portrays Fanny's belief and hope that finding Léda will facilitate her equal integration as fanciful if not deluded: she faces constant setbacks and deceptions and, ultimately, the very existence of her aunt is depicted as a potential 'affabulation'.[86] NDiaye develops this theme through the contradictions between the family and Fanny's memories, and the fact that the relationship between Fanny's mother and father may have arisen from the former's obsession with fictitious depictions of exotified men.[87] Further, her use of the fantastic in relation to Fanny's resurrection and metamorphoses, and the circular immobility of her quest, blurs the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

NDiaye also portrays how the characters themselves blur the boundaries between fiction and reality by creating narratives that often contradict reality to suit their own purposes. This is exemplified in the motif of photos that recurs throughout the novel. Photographs play an important role in both Fanny's quest for inclusion and equality and her family and society's attempts to marginalise and exclude her. At the beginning of the novel, Fanny presents her family with a photo of herself with her mother to prove she is one of them as though it were, as Shirley Jordan notes, a passport.[88] Similarly, she relies on a blurred photo of Léda to locate her. Jordan demonstrates that NDiaye's use of blurred photographs of Fanny or Léda throughout the novel signals the blurring of the strange and the familiar and thus how subjectivity 'esquive la fixité [et] reste impénétrable'.[89] Yet Fanny's family and other ethnic majority characters use these photos to prop up their essentialised production of identity and the social hierarchies in which this is imbricated. As blurred photos are open to interpretation, Nora Cotille-Foley argues that NDiaye uses them to reveal how those with authority, like Colette, give meaning to the photos and become the guarantors of identity.[90] This is evident in Tante Colette's use of a blurred photo, supposedly of Fanny as a child identical to her white cousins, and another where she is older and

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[85] For example, in the introduction the narrator speaks of Don Quijote as a real man and suggests he is referring to real places but not mentioning them explicitly because he does not wish to remember them. Similarly, in the conclusion, he speaks of Don Quijote's bones as if they were real. See Cervantes Saavedra (2012), pp.560, 27042.
[86] Moudileno (1998), p.447.
[87] For a greater analysis of several of these themes in relation to the fiction-reality dichotomy see Hertich (2005).
[88] See Shirley Jordan, 'Enigmes photographiques, albums éclatés', in *Marie NDiaye : l'étrangeté à L'œuvre,* ed. by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2009).
[89] Ibid. p.67.
[90] Nora Cotille-Foley, 'Optique fantastique, traitement de la photographie et transgression des limites du visible chez Marie NDiaye', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies,* 13:5 (2009), p.548.

her 'singularité' stands out. From these, she argues that Fanny is responsible for cultivating the difference with which she is marked and blames her for the family's treatment of her, including her exclusion.[91] In this way, Colette uses photos to uphold her perverse version of reality and, in an inversion of Fanny's attempt to prove her connection, to deny Fanny's right to belong as an equal in the family. As this section aims to prove, NDiaye's use of photographs symbolises how the ethnic majority not only attempt to assign Fanny's identity but also to control the narrative about, and therefore shape, reality more generally. In particular, it will expose how they use discourses around universalist rights and obligations to blur the distinction between fiction and reality in relation to the injustices Fanny faces in order to restrictively direct her.

Multiple texts and discourses throughout the novel, some intended to protect ethnic minority women's identities or rights, are 'blurred' by the privileged to align them with their own construction of reality and to exploit, disempower or exclude Fanny. One such example is Fanny's application for citizenship of her family's village after she has taken on Tante Colette's supposedly perfect form.[92] She is informed that the new laws that simplify this process are only applied 'lorsque nous sommes sûrs de la fiabilité de la personne à qui nous avons affaire'.[93] However, rumours are circulating in the village about the extent of her transformation and, consequently, her reliability, including among her own family.[94] For this reason, the council decides to 'soumettre sa demande à la rigueur des vieilles lois' and, as a result, refuse her citizenship.[95] Here, judging someone as unreliable justifies the modification of rules or laws applied to them so that the applicant must meet certain obligations to be granted citizenship, rather than receiving it as a result of *jus solis* or *jus sanguinis* policies alone. Fanny herself recognises this as she realises that they view her as a stranger and overwhelm her with 'des obligations contraignantes', rather than seeing her desire for citizenship of her family's village as an 'honneur' for them.[96]

The emphasis the council places on ethnic minorities' obligations can be related to ideas about integration present in the first *Haut Conseil à l'intégration* report in 1991 and *Le contrat d'intégration républicaine* introduced in 2016, which is still in force today. Republican definitions of integration emphasise that citizenship entails duties as well as rights, including the need to espouse and act on the universalist principles of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.[97] As a result, the granting of French citizenship, as Sara Mazouz argues in her ethnographic study of citizenship

[91] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.150-52.
[92] Ibid. p.212.
[93] Ibid. p.226.
[94] See ibid. p.254.
[95] Ibid. p.226.
[96] Ibid. p.228.
[97] See Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991), p.18; République française (25/06/2021).

interviews, continues to be linked to a person's ability to demonstrate their 'worthiness' of and loyalty to the nation, and, as part of this, that they are '*de bonne vie et moeurs*'.[98] Mazouz demonstrates how the injunction to respect French values and be of 'good moral conduct and character' as part of the acceptance criteria for citizenship depicts French values as superior and, consequently, the French as capable of, and justified in, judging the morality and worthiness of others. By labelling Fanny dishonest, the villagers present her as being of questionable and inferior morals and as undeserving of citizenship: untrustworthiness is translated to unworthiness.

However, conjectural links between justice and judgements about 'good character' are, as Ahmed notes, highly problematic:

> Justice is not about 'good character'. Not only does this model work to conceal the power relations at stake in defining what is good-in-itself, but it also works to individuate, personalise and privatise the social relation of (in)justice. Character is, after all, an effect rather than a ground of social life.[99]

In other words, the ability to label someone as being of 'good character' arises from power relations and social structures and can therefore be mobilised for their reproduction. In particular, it masks the link between this process and such structural inequalities by depicting individuals as entirely responsible for what happens to them or how others see them. In her analysis of Colette's speech, Lydie Moudileno argues that 'la responsabilité de la collectivité est minimisée au profit d'une mise en cause du comportement individuel de l'intéressée'.[100] NDiaye highlights this issue multiple times throughout the novel, including when, in response to Fanny's statement that the family does not treat her equally, Colette says that 'chacun était responsable de ce qui lui arrive'.[101] Through a neoliberal focus on individual responsibility, Colette deflects attention from the family's unjust treatment of Fanny and portrays her niece as entirely responsible for her own marginalisation. Similarly, Fanny's transformation, and its fluidity as it seems to fade, is deemed proof of her untrustworthiness although, as a form of *blancness*, it is the product of society's racism and its traumatic impact on her.

Additionally, the distrust Fanny faces begins well before her metamorphoses and is linked to the way others mark her because of her origins and gender. For example, strangers such as Lucette refuse to believe Fanny's connection to her family; Isabelle, a childhood friend, more

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[98] Mazouz (2019), p.144. Although its inclusion within a discursive framework of integration is new, this is not a recent development as nationality applications during the Fourth Republic contained discussions about the applicant's moral standing.
[99] Ahmed (2004), p.195.
[100] Moudileno (1998), p.152; Gaensbauer also argues that the family blames the victim, see Gaensbauer (2009).
[101] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.17.

readily believes that Fanny has always lied about her identity than that her family has treated her unfairly; and Eugène's reaction to Fanny's invitation to accompany her expresses how, 'Disant ce qu'elle pensait, cela se transformait en mensonge!'.[102] Meanwhile, when Colette throws rotten fruit at Fanny to chase her away, the villagers laugh at Fanny because 'On faisait confiance à Tante Colette pour ne pas se divertir au dépens de quelqu'un qui ne l'eût pas mérité'.[103] Whiteness confers authority and trustworthiness on Colette that means her violence towards this ethnic minority woman is automatically judged to be justified and so overlooked. On the other hand, Fanny's racialisation means that strangers, friends and family assume she lies whenever her thoughts do not align with their prejudiced assumptions about the correlations between Frenchness, whiteness and the superiority of republican values. In this vein, NDiaye reveals how the idea that an integration process based upon the supposed worthiness of ethnic minorities promotes equality and demarginalisation is false because it reinforces structural inequalities in France. Yet the blurring of reality and fiction through this narrative makes it possible to blame ethnic minority women like Fanny for the effects of this inegalitarian social system.

Similarly, assumptions about white French superiority and worthiness shape Fanny's citizenship application and become a metaphorical wall excluding her, like a barbed wire wall at the border. Ahmed uses the 'wall' as a concept central to directionality to offer 'a materialism that shows how history becomes concrete. Walls allow us to think about how obstacles can be physical, in the world, and yet how these obstacles are only obstacles for some bodies'.[104] Fanny's systematic racialisation in French society which, as demonstrated earlier, cannot be disentangled from a history of race and sex-based discrimination and exploitation traceable to French involvement in the slave trade and colonialism, means that she faces obstacles to her full integration in society. The association of whiteness, Frenchness and moral superiority means that Fanny's white family do not need to meet the same conditions and, for this reason, do not experience this obstacle at all. Indeed, Ahmed goes further to argue that those who are privileged are 'invested in not seeing' these walls and obscure how they maintain their privilege and an inegalitarian social system by depicting those obstructed by walls as 'wall makers'.[105] Labelling Fanny as unworthy can be seen in this light as this accusation portrays Fanny, rather than her discriminatory family or village, as creating barriers to her own integration. Thus, when the promise of abstraction is not met in France, the discourses of republican universalism and integration can blur reality by concealing, firstly, how the conditions of worthiness are shaped by racism and sexism and, secondly, the inegalitarian social system perpetuated through this

[102] Ibid. p.23.
[103] Ibid. pp.160-61.
[104] Ahmed (2017), pp.135-36.
[105] Ibid. pp.138, 41.

process. In this way, we can build upon Burnautzki's argument that the failure of abstraction indicates '*l'aporie de l'universalisme républicain*' because of 'l'écart entre la déclaration formelle de l'égalité en droit de tous les citoyens français sans égard à leur origine et une réalité sociale marquée par les discriminations et les exclusions bien réelles'.[106] Instead, NDiaye's depiction of the blurring of reality involved in this process exposes how republican universalism, through a discourse of integration through rights and duties, can be a vehicle for inequality rather than merely an ideology emptied of its principles.

A duplicitous discourse of universal rights and duties is also employed by Fanny's family. In a conversation redolent of Fanny's earlier citizenship request, her deceased grandmother's spirit confronts her as she drinks at a water fountain in the village where she has become a sex-worker. She demands whether Fanny has 'acquired the right' to drink that water because, in the grandmother's opinion, she constitutes neither a visitor nor a 'véritable habitante'.[107] This underlines Fanny's impossible situation as the family's racialisation of her places her, as Hertich notes, between two antithetical positions: 'here or there'.[108] This exclusionary mechanism has an impact not just on whether she is seen to belong to the villages she inhabits but also, as the grandmother suggests, on her access to the same rights and equality as the ethnic majority.

The grandmother's questions in the village can also be linked to a previous scene in which she reprimands Fanny for self-obsession in her quest for integration. She explains to Fanny that: 'le devoir d'assurer son devenir ne t'est pas moins étranger que […] ces droits que tu crois avoir. Cependant, tu ne blâmes que cette dernière attitude'.[109] Here, the *aïeule* transplants discourses about rights and duties in relation to the nation within the French family. She argues that Fanny only focuses on her familial rights and neglects the duties fulfilled by other family members. In particular, the grandmother refers to her cousins' marriages, houses and the children they will have 'en temps voulu' as a manifestation of their commitment to the family's future and signals that Fanny's abandonment of Georges and desire for Eugène run contrary to her obligations.[110] Her argument that Eugène 'ne t'était pas destiné' and that the family expects her to behave like her cousins suggests that the same rules apply universally to everyone and Fanny alone is responsible for failing her family. The grandmother therefore, with reference to the idea of reciprocal rights and duties, reinforces Colette's argument that Fanny is undeserving of the rights that accompany membership.

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[106] Burnautzki (2013), p.143.
[107] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.291.
[108] Hertich (2005), p.720.
[109] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.289.
[110] Ibid.

Yet, as Michael Sheringham notes, the grandmother's speech is filled with the same kinds of contradictions as Colette's and their way of blaming Fanny is undermined by their admissions that she cannot do anything right in the family or villagers' eyes.[111] This kind of discrepancy is also present within the grandmother's references to rights and duties and their supposed universality for all family members when she attempts to persuade Fanny to stop working as a prostitute. When Fanny suggests that her new situation is an improvement on how she was treated by the family, the spirit of the *aïeule* states that it is her 'devoir' to inform Fanny that she is in a 'situation dépravée' arising from 'ce que les villages savent créer à tes dépens, dans leur exécration de toute forme d'étrangeté'.[112] This explanation, which points to the intersection between the sexual exploitation Fanny faces as a sex worker and the xenophobia prevalent in rural France, appears insightful and compassionate from a woman who often denied her ties to her ethnic minority granddaughter.[113] However, the *aïeule* then adds: 'Il valait mieux, vois-tu, qu'on murmure dans ton dos par chez nous'.[114] The contrast made by the *aïeule*, particularly through phrases like 'situation dépravé','exécration' and 'murmure dans ton dos', minimises or denies the family's violence towards Fanny and, as a result, suggests that she is better off accepting an inferior and marginalised position within the family than prostituting herself. Her choice of neutral phrases like 'devoir' and 'il valait mieux' raises further questions about to whom the grandmother is fulfilling her duty by advising Fanny not to continue her sex work. This is elucidated in the statement by Fanny's cousin when, seeking her out for Eugène, she discovers Fanny is a sex worker: 'Ainsi, Fanny avait ici sa fonction, ai-je ressenti bien vite, ce qui, lorsque je songeais à l'honnêteté de notre famille depuis des générations, m'affligeait bien davantage que s'il était apparu qu'on la rejetât de toutes parts'.[115] In her analysis of this quotation, Jean Duffy notes that Fanny gains purpose and, as a result, is tolerated in this role because, through accepting the stigma associated with both her origins and work, she is 'affirming the normality of the other members of the community'.[116] The cousin's reflections on the family's 'integrity' underline that she is concerned less about the abuse Fanny faces than the possibility that, through their connection, the stigma associated with her role will tarnish the family's reputation and 'normality' among the ethnic majority.

Similarly, the grandmother's fantastic and dutiful intervention is motivated by the desire to protect the white family's image and interests, rather than those of its most vulnerable

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[111] Sheringham (2007), p.35.
[112] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.293.
[113] Ibid. p.153.
[114] Ibid. p.293.
[115] Ibid. p.297.
[116] Jean Duffy, 'Liminality and Fantasy in Marie Darrieussecq, Marie NDiaye and Marie Redonnet', *French Issue,* 124:4 (2009), p.928.

member. In light of this, her use of the present tense when referring to Fanny's duties towards the family conveys how the family, and by extension the Republic, can still mobilise the discourse of rights and duties to try to direct Fanny's attitude and behaviour for their own benefit, even though she has been socially marginalised and excluded. Additionally, the violent racism and sexism of French society, of which the family otherwise feigns ignorance, can be acknowledged and used to portray the family in a better light and therefore attempt to rekindle Fanny's desire for integration. As Ahmed notes, it is through the constant deferral of promises, such as those of happiness or integration, that these notions become directive.[117] In this way, the grandmother and rest of the family continue to use the idea of integration through marriage to Eugène as a means to subjugate her to its will, making her abandon the stigmatised sex work and transform herself once more. NDiaye thus depicts the discourses of integration and reciprocal rights and duties as, like the grandmother, having an uncanny afterlife as they are employed from beyond the grave after Fanny's exclusion to direct and control her. At the same time, NDiaye signals the relevance of universalist integration discourses not just in the naturalisation process for non-nationals, but also in the (non)integration of ethnic minorities in France. Through blurring the reality of Fanny's abuse at the hands of her family and the perpetuity of her marginalisation, the white family ensnare this young woman in a vicious cycle. They exclude Fanny as unworthy and yet repeatedly recall her to her 'duty' towards the family and the nation through the promise of integration; a process that re-enacts her inferiorisation and incentivises her to fit an oppressive racialised and gendered mould in French society.

Fanny's uncle Georges also uses the rhetoric of duties towards the family to justify Fanny's exclusion: 'Tu te moques des règles et des coutumes, et des nécessaires sacrifices familiaux, et des devoirs d'abnégation'.[118] One of the disparities in such statements about sacrifice is highlighted by Sheringham as he identifies Fanny's representation as a sacrificial lamb as one of the novel's main themes. Outlining what he describes as the family's 'law of sacrifice', Sheringham notes how it produces Fanny as an abject other and, through her exclusion, 'it symbolically expunges its own darkness' and so protects the alleged 'homogeneity of the social body'.[119] In light of this contradiction between George's use of the term sacrifice and the family's treatment of Fanny, it is worth considering further the implications of Georges' accusation.

As with *l'aïeule*'s statements, George's pronouncement makes it appear as though the duties apply equally to everyone in the family, such that they all follow the same path. Both Georges and the grandmother's complaints about Fanny's behaviour resemble the accusation of

[117] See Ahmed (2004), p.197.
[118] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.168.
[119] Sheringham (2007), p.33.

willfulness, which Ahmed describes as 'a way of diagnosing critique and opposition as self-interest'.[120] Whilst the rest of the family are depicted as subsuming and sacrificing their own will to that of the family, Fanny's quest for equality through integration is seen as 'a problem of will' in which, Fanny goes her own way and, therefore, goes the 'wrong way'.[121] Her belief in, and desire for, the republican universalist promise of equality is conceived as a form of self-interest incompatible with loyalty to the family which makes her unworthy of membership. This paradoxical argument also occurs at a national level because, as Mazouz demonstrates, applicants and naturalised citizens are expected to view French universalist principles as superior and yet compelled to mask their desire to benefit from them: to manifest their worthiness they must appear devoid of self-interest and concerned only with loyalty to the nation.[122] As such, a different attitude towards republican universalist rights is expected of those fetishised as outsiders whilst the ethnic majority can take them for granted. The existence of differing expectations and rules within Fanny's family, in spite of Georges' insinuation that rights and self-sacrifice are applied universally, is highlighted throughout *En famille*. For example, Fanny is aware that Eugène and her mother go unpunished for the disloyalty they show to the family through regular insults whilst she is not allowed to question the behaviour of its members without censure.[123] George's idea of universal self-sacrifice is further undermined by his rape of Fanny before her exclusion and his serial adultery and abandonment of Colette despite her financial dependence on him.[124] George's silent reappearance in the family conveys how his behaviour is accepted in spite of its negative socio-economic implications for the family.[125] This non-response to Georges' own willfulness, as he ignores the family's interests and goes his own way, reveals that he is not expected follow the same rules and to sacrifice his will to the family.

Willfulness, as Ahmed notes, is an accusation only levelled at the victims of oppressive systems such as women and ethnic minorities to present them as the problem and justify violence against them.[126] By labelling Fanny as unworthy because she does not sacrifice her will to them, the family create a wall to immobilise and re-direct Fanny which does not exist for her white (male) family members. This masks the violence and oppression she faces before and through this process and justifies the application of different rules to her because, in Colette's words, she is 'passible du jugement le plus sévère'.[127] So the employment of a deceptive republican universalist

[120] Ahmed (2017), p.71.
[121] Ibid. p.65.
[122] Mazouz (2019), p.155.
[123] See NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.20, 61, 134, 288.
[124] Ibid. p.218.
[125] Ibid. p.302.
[126] Ahmed (2017), p.74.
[127] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.156.

discourse of reciprocal and universal rights and duties conceals and facilitates the perpetuation of gendered and racialised social hierarchies which require ethnic minority women like Fanny to sacrifice their freedom and equality. For this reason, Fanny's exclusion protects not only, as Sheringham argues, the family's (and the nation's) myth of its own homogeneity and purity but also a systematically inegalitarian society.[128]

The coincidence of George's unremarked reappearance with Fanny's fantastic disintegration, when she tries to remove her 'singularité' again to comply with Eugène's demands, further underlines how different rules are applied to them. Whereas as Georges is silently restored to his position of privilege within the family, toleration of Fanny could only be considered if she fantastically erases the ethnic difference with which she is marked. Yet the family denies its responsibility for the violence involved in making this transformation an obligation as Eugène, upon hearing of cousin's disintegrated and dying form, exclames 'je ne lui en avais pas demandé autant!'.[129] Just as Ahmed notes that those who are privileged are invested in not seeing the walls and obstacles created for the oppressed in society, Eugène refuses to acknowledge his role in perpetuating both discrimination and inequality through discourses of worthiness and its terrible consequences for Fanny.[130] In this way, Marie NDiaye highlights not only the violence facilitated through republican universalist discourses through Fanny's fantastic metamorphosis but also how those who perpetrate and benefit from it deny this and blame the oppressed for their own suffering. In other words, republican universalism can be used to dissociate the result, Fanny's disintegration and death, from its true cause, the racism and sexism prevalent in the family and French society generally, in order for the ethnic majority to eschew its responsibility towards those whom they minoritise. This reveals that the laws and norms expressed by *l'aieüle* and Georges which structure the family and society more generally in NDiaye's novels are not only lacking in moral content, as Brendlé argues, but that this moral content is lacking for some people only, namely those who are unmarked in French society.[131]

Although the discourse of rights and duties might suggest that Fanny could earn citizenship or integration, the findings of Mazouz's research suggest that demarginalisation is made impossible because of the conception of citizenship as a 'favour' rather than a right.[132] Mazouz notes how this leads to expectations that, even after naturalisation, new citizens must continue to demonstrate their worthiness. Similarly, Colette states that the family's toleration of

[128] Sheringham (2007), p.33.
[129] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.310.
[130] Ahmed (2017), p.138.
[131] Brendlé, (2017) p.551.
[132] Mazouz (2019), p.144.

Fanny constitutes a 'sacrifice' that Fanny should have recompensed by submitting to their desires, including marrying Georges and not outperforming Eugène at school.[133] When toleration, like citizenship, is conceived as a favour, submission to oppression can be portrayed as a duty. In turn, conceiving submission of someone's will to another as a duty masks the violence involved in this process and this is particularly true when the failure to act in this way is depicted as oppressive. Colette's accusation that Fanny has 'écrasé' her cousin Eugène by excelling at school can be seen in this light.[134] The image Colette creates of Fanny pressing or crushing her son resonates with Frye's relation of oppression to its etymological root 'to press': 'Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them'.[135] Pressing, like crushing, serves to reduce something or someone in size or stature and to immobilise them by restraining their movement. Similarly, Colette's argument conveys her fears that Fanny threatens Eugène's social mobility and ability to succeed in the future and also society's inflated image of white masculinity. Fanny's failure in her duty to 'humbly' let her white, male cousin be academically superior to her is therefore, like her quest for equality, conceived by the family as a 'will to power' that challenges his position in the social hierarchy and thereby oppresses him.[136] Presenting the victim as an oppressor unworthy of integration justifies, and so diverts attention away from, the race and sex-based inequalities Fanny faces and thus constitutes one of the many intersecting wires of the cage which reinforces Fanny's oppression.[137]

Another way in which Colette tries to direct Fanny towards carrying out her 'duty' to the family is by linking it to her personal fulfilment. When speaking about the oxymoronic 'parfaite insignifiance' they expect of her, Colette asks Fanny 'Pouvais-tu avoir d'autre ambition?'.[138] Similarly, she questions the value of Fanny's excellent performance at school: 'A quoi cela te servait-il? A te rendre l'estime de ta famille?'.[139] These questions suggest to Fanny that pleasing and gaining the respect of the family by carrying out her duty towards them should be her aim in life and, at the same time, a source of fulfilment or happiness for her. Ahmed explains how the notions of fulfilment and happiness become directive: 'happiness is often assumed to be an end point: as what we want to reach, as the point of life, the aim of life. The path we should follow is the path that would lead us to happiness'.[140] By telling Fanny that pleasing her family would offer her fulfilment, Colette is presenting this as a condition for Fanny's happiness as well as her

[133] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.154.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Frye (1983), p.2.
[136] Ahmed (2017), p.71.
[137] Frye (1983), p.8.
[138] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.154.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ahmed (2010), p.48.

integration. Or, more precisely, she presents happiness as the destination which Fanny could reach through a process of integration that, as already demonstrated, is based upon pleasing others through submitting her own will to theirs. Colette thus also implies that 'wilfully' going her own way, consciously or unconsciously opposing the oppressive path set for her by the family, will make Fanny not just unworthy but also unhappy.[141] The directionality of this discourse is evoked by NDiaye through Fanny's dogged determination for integration in spite of the oppression she continues to face. As the inversion of the threat of being expelled as abject, the family integrates the promise of happiness into the discourses around universalist rights and duties towards the family, and by extension the nation, to direct Fanny towards the socially inferior and financially dependent position expected of her because of both her gender and origins.

The family's expulsion of Fanny as abject, which is linked to way she diverges from the path they have set her, is also related to her denunciation of their behaviour. Although she blames this on Léda's absence, she nevertheless criticises their marginalisation of her and denial of her equal rights. This exposes their failure to uphold republican universalist principles and challenges their contradictory and socially constructed narrative that French society is egalitarian but the ethnic majority is also morally superior. As a result, the ethnic majority repeatedly attempts to silence Fanny and, therefore, blur the gap that exists between universalist promises and reality. This is exemplified in the assumption that she is untrustworthy which means that no one listens to or believes Fanny's side of the story. It can also be seen in her mother and aunt's announcements that they are excluding her as a result of her first metamorphosis and her quest for integration, respectively. They deny Fanny the right to contest their decisions when the mother ends her rejection letter by telling her not to see or write to her and Colette tells her she is explaining why the family excludes her to 'te clouer le bec'.[142] Further, Colette's insistence that Fanny should have demonstrated 'effacement' and 'discrétion' in return for the family's toleration depicts her silence as a duty and, consequently, a condition of worthiness.[143] Fanny's conversation with her grandmother's spirit also raises the issue of silencing and even suggests that it extends beyond her freedom of speech: 'Mais, pensait Fanny outrée, ne pouvant parler à l'esprit, est-il juste que je doive, moi, faire tant d'efforts, alors qu'il a suffi à Eugène de venir au monde? Eugène, un jour, te traita de… un sifflement furieux agita les branches, interrompit brusquement la pensée de Fanny…'.[144] The way in which her grandmother's spirit is portrayed as emanating from the tree, on this occasion, suggests that this abrupt movement and noise is her way of interrupting and silencing her niece as she considers the unequal treatment she faces. As Fanny

[141] Ahmed (2017), p.53.
[142] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.150, 225.
[143] Ibid. p.154.
[144] Ibid. pp.287-88.

does not express this out loud, this fantastic encounter unveils how silencing is intended to restrict minorities' thoughts as well as speech.

The silencing of critique also resonates with the author's own experience after she received the Goncourt, France's most distinguished literary prize, for *Trois femmes puissantes* in 2009. Eric Raoult, the UMP MP of Seine-Saint-Denis, subsequently criticised NDiaye for describing Sarkozy's France as 'monstrueux', with an 'atmosphère de flicage, de vulgarité', in an interview earlier that year.[145] He implied this was slanderous and argued that Goncourt winners should have a '*devoir de réserve*' and respect '*la cohésion nationale et l'image de notre pays*'.[146] As Moudileno indicates, Raoult's response to NDiaye's opinions arises from his racialisation of her: 'jamais le député français ne se serait permis une telle leçon de civisme […] s'il s'était agi d'un écrivain de "souche française"'.[147]

Whilst NDiaye and Fanny's situations differ greatly because of the platform that NDiaye has gained as a distinguished author, the responses of Raoult and the ethnic majority characters of *En famille* reveal that these women's experiences form part of an overall system disempowering and silencing ethnic minority women in France. For example, Raoult's association of NDiaye's statement about the nation with calumny mirrors the assumption by the ethnic majority that Fanny lies about her identity or facing discrimination because these narratives do not match their ethnocentric conception of republican universalism. Additionally, the way he invalidates NDiaye's opinion that Sarkozy's France is immoral by describing it as calumnious poses NDiaye as the problem in the same way that Colette's accusation masks Fanny's oppression by characterising her as the oppressor. Both examples divert attention away from the issues being raised in the first place and therefore serve to conceal racial injustices in France.

Further, Raoult's reference to her duty to respect national cohesion suggests that her behaviour poses a threat to an otherwise harmonious French society; an argument that masks the racist nature of his attitude and behaviour, along with the social division this creates. In other words, he fails or refuses to recognise how republican universalism can function as a racialised particularism and blames ethnic minorities for criticising its consequences. This 'duty' of silence also reproduces inequalities as it treats ethnic minorities, regardless of nationality, as second-class citizens who must perpetually demonstrate their worthiness of and indebtedness to the French nation. Just as Colette and other ethnic majority characters try to silence Fanny's

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[145] Laure Equy, 'Raoult (UMP) invente un « devoir de réserve » pour les Prix Goncourt', *Libération,* (10/11/2009) <https://www.liberation.fr/france/2009/11/10/raoult-ump-invente-un-devoir-de-reserve-pour-les-prix-goncourt_592880> [accessed 31/07/2020].
[146] Ibid.
[147] Moudileno (2013), p.169.

denunciations of her oppression and exclusion, Raoult blurs the reality of structural racism and sexism in France and constructs himself as the guarantor of the republic's disingenuous universalist image and identity. Although NDiaye's position as an author allows her to have the last word as she explains that Raoult's statements 'dépassent en ridicule tout ce qu'on peut imaginer', Fanny is often successfully silenced by the family and villagers.[148] In spite of the almost two decades which separate this novel and NDiaye's experiences, both author and protagonist face systemic inequalities, including attempted silencing, imbricated in gendered and racialised social hierarchies. Furthermore, as the novel demonstrates, these occur not just in spite of the discourse of republican universalist integration but through it as discourses of universalist rights, duties, and worthiness are adopted to blur the reality of and, consequently, reproduce social systems privileging the white (male) ethnic majority.

Another example of silencing portrayed in the novel is the erasure of Fanny's existence in the family's memory after her death. The concluding pages of the novel are dedicated not to Fanny's experience of disintegration as a result of her transformation but to Colette's quest to find Eugène a successful position. Once Colette has abandoned what remains of Fanny in a shed, she takes Eugène to Fanny's father, a successful businessman, in the hope that he will offer Eugène the kind of post of which they have both dreamed but his laziness has thus far made unattainable. Whilst researchers have suggested that this reaching out to Fanny's foreign father is evidence of increasing openness to others, this does not extend to Fanny.[149] Just as the family chooses to forget about Fanny's existence during an absence in her teenage years and after her first death, 'pour ne l'avoir jamais comptée parmi les habitants du village', she is written out of the family and village's history after her final death.[150] The family carry on as normal to pursue the ideals for white French men which played an important role in creating the inequalities experienced by Fanny. In turn, denying and subsequently forgetting about the injustices Fanny faced after her death allows this causal link to also be erased.

In light of the implicit connections between the family, the village and the nation throughout the novel, Fanny's erasure can be compared to Renan's conception of nation-building. He argues that a sense of national identity is constructed through the way 'les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses'.[151] Various scholars, including Mame-Fatou Niang in her analysis of republican universalism, have

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[148] Didier Jacob and Grégoire Leménager, 'Marie NDiaye persiste et signe', *Le Nouvel Observateur,* (2009) <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20091123.BIB4469/marie-ndiaye-persiste-et-signe.html> [accessed 01/09/2020].
[149] See Cotille-Foley (2009); Hertich (2005).
[150] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.7, 223.
[151] Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, (Paris: Pierre Bordas et fils, 1991 (1882)), p.34.

demonstrated that cultural amnesia in relation to colonialism has been central to the perpetuation of racism in France: 'France's reluctance to deal with the legacy of its imperial past both underpins its selective amnesia and provides a solid foundation for institutional racism'.[152] As demonstrated earlier, NDiaye uses imagery to convey the continuities between the racism involved in colonialism and slavery. Through the depiction of the family's amnesia in relation to Fanny, NDiaye communicates how the injustices that her protagonist wishes to tackle continue after her death in the same way that inferiorising discourses survived the end of colonialism. By erasing her from its memory, including her denunciations, the family can reproduce its narrative simultaneously associating the nation with a naturally superior whiteness yet claiming that the nation enacts its superior universalist principles. This process thereby blurs the reality of the past and present forms of violence and inequality upon which such a narrative is founded. Just as NDiaye's reference to the quasi-mythologised tale of *Don Quijote* highlights the fiction/reality themes in the novel, she portrays the construction of French national identity and republican universalist discourses as the narrative's real sites of myth-making that impede the quest for justice. NDiaye's work therefore helps develop an intersectional feminist consciousness by drawing attention to the gender and race-based violence involved in this mythologisation and how this is masked by universalist conceptions of integration, worthiness and reciprocal rights and duties.

Internalised Inferiority and the Challenges of Resistance

In addition to illuminating how republican universalist discourses are mobilised to perpetuate intersectional discrimination and inequality in French society, NDiaye explores the role that internalisation plays in this process. As demonstrated in my analysis of Linda Lê's works, internalisation contributes significantly to how ethnic minority women can be moulded towards silence and immobility. Imposing and normalising beliefs that justify oppression upon racialised and gendered minorities constitutes a significant reproductive tendency of domination as it can lead to their complicity in this process.[153] This section examines how Fanny internalises the kinds of inferiorising and deceptive republican universalist discourses identified above and is thereby trapped by their directionality. In particular, it exposes how the need to display her worthiness by pleasing others, even as she seeks equality through integration, means she contributes to the continuation of intersectional social hierarchies, including in her relationships with other ethnic minorities. This section then considers how NDiaye, firstly, employs the fantastic to highlight the

[152] Niang (2020); See also Blanchard (2000).
[153] See Pyke (2010).

challenges of resistance as a result of internalisation within the narrative. Secondly, it outlines NDiaye's employment of the fantastic among other literary tools allows her to undermine intersectional power relations and the discourses which sustain them through the narrative.

A significant example of internalisation in the novel is related to the shame that Colette argues that Fanny begins to feel about her 'singularité': 'Mais, ce qui est curieux, c'est que la singularité que nous ne voyions en toi, tu en as pris apparemment une conscience de plus en plus vive en grandissant, nous forçant à la découvrir, bien malgré nous. […] Je ne sais ce qui, tout d'abord, t'a rendue honteuse de ce que tu étais…'.[154] Colette's accusation portrays Fanny as responsible, through an awareness of her difference that is experienced as shame, for making an inherent 'singularité' visible to the family when it would otherwise have remain unremarked. This shame meant Fanny wished to be served last, hid behind others for photos and, while fearing exclusion, would have thought it justified.[155] Nathalie Duclot-Clément proposes that Fanny's 'malaise' is indicative of an 'altérité endogène', whereby she 'ressent sa différence par rapport au groupe'.[156] Further, she notes that Fanny's desire to erase this difference is a natural response that leads to the 'contamination' of 'les relations au groupe'.[157] Likewise, Colette suggests that it was inevitable that Fanny's shame would persuade the family of her inferiority and so blames her niece for the way in which the family looks down on and mistreats her. Like Colette and Duclot-Clément, Colette Sarrey-Strack argues that it is Fanny's awareness of her difference which provokes the change in behaviour of the family.[158]

However, Flavia Bujor suggests that Fanny's shame must have an external source and that it is evidence of 'l'intériorisation du point de vue du village'.[159] NDiaye offers a clue to this issue through the mirroring of Fanny's experiences with her family in her relationship with Lucette. The author depicts how Fanny's view of herself is influenced by Lucette's inferiorising attitude towards her, as exemplified when the Lucette introduces Fanny to her new role: 'Je vous montre la cuisine, d'une voix altérée si égoïstement par le plaisir et par le dégoût que Fanny s'empourpra de honte et se sentit faite, soudain, d'une chair bien inférieure à celle de Lucette'.[160] Whilst Lucette's joy arises from knowing she no longer has to work in a position she finds degrading as a white woman, her disgust can be linked to how her belief that Fanny is inferior because of her

[154] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.151.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Nathalie Duclot-Clément, 'Encres et ancrages : marquages du corps et dérives métaphoriques, Maryse Condé, Tony Morrison, Marie NDiaye', in *Libres horizons : pour une approche comparatiste, lettres francophones imaginaires,* ed. by Micéala Symington (Paris: Harmattan, 2008), pp.409, 13.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Sarrey-Strack (2002), p.112.
[159] Bujor, (2018) p.345.
[160] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.75.

origins is now reinforced by her undertaking this supposedly inferior role. Significantly, this passage reveals that Fanny's sense of shame is the result of her reading and internalising the inferiorising attitudes and emotions that allow Lucette to uphold her belief in her own superiority.

The mirroring between this example and Colette's accusation suggests that Fanny's shame during her childhood and the way she consequently expected to be treated as a second-class citizen also arose from, rather than caused, her family's failure to be blind to difference. In turn, Fanny's internalisation of the family and wider village's racism and sexism as a child reinforced the oppressive moulding process as she accepted the inferior identity and position which they imposed upon her. In a similar vein, Christine Delphy argues that the French integration process reproduces relations of domination because it is based on toleration, the opposite of acceptance, and dependent upon minorities admitting their alleged inferiority.[161] As shame and the desire to make oneself invisible can exemplify this, Fanny's behaviour with Lucette and her family reflects how she internalises this marking. Yet, by referring to this shame to accuse Fanny of ignoring her duty of difference-blindness, and so being the cause of her alleged unworthiness, the family deny that this is in their interests and that it arises from their failure to uphold republican universalist principles. This concealment is reinforced through, on the one hand, Colette's use of polite and embellished rhetoric in her statement 'nous forçant à la découvrir, bien malgré nous' that, as demonstrated earlier, belies the violence which it simultaneously enacts. On the other hand, her use of the term 'forcer' again depicts Fanny not just as responsible for her suffering but also as oppressive in the way she 'imposes' her 'singularité' on the family. Colette's argument is therefore yet another manifestation of her neoliberal belief that 'chacun était responsable de ce qui lui arrive' and how the smooth functioning of unequal power relations allows her to blame oppressed individuals for the consequences of the marginalisation and inequality they face.[162]

Colette's accusation can also be linked to the argument that any threats to republican universalism and its principles, such as abstraction and integration, are external. In particular, it resembles the suggestion that minorities import multiculturalist notions about identity and difference that are incompatible with abstraction and hence are the ones responsible for sowing division within French society.[163] In other words, any reductive differentiations based on ethnicity or gender, for example, are assumed to be the fault of those who most suffer their consequences,

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[161] See Christine Delphy, 'The French 'Integration' Model is a Tragedy: Christine Delphy on Race, Caste, and Gender in France', *Verso*, (2015) <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2024-the-french-integration-model-is-a-tragedy-christine-delphy-on-race-caste-and-gender-in-france> [04/03/2020].
[162] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.17.
[163] See Le manifeste des 100 (31/10/2020).

often when they are trying to shed light on such unjust consequences. Similarly, Colette implies that Fanny's shame arises from an external source and is the cause of the division within the family. Yet, through highlighting how it is society's pre-existing racialisation of Fanny masked through universalist discourses that leads to her internalised sense of shame, NDiaye undermines this narrative about republican universalism and encourages the reader to look closer to home to understand the kind of division and inequality that plagues her ethnic minority female character.

Moving on from her discussion of shame, Colette notes an important shift in Fanny's behaviour which is evidenced in her announcement of her quest for Léda: 'voilà que l'orgueil t'a saisi, voilà que tu ne tolérais plus la condescendance défiante avec laquelle nous te parlions'.[164] Although admitting the condescension with which the family treats Fanny, Colette's rhetoric once again depicts Fanny as responsible for the discrimination she faces before and after this very normal rather than fantastic transformation. The way she characterises Fanny as proud and, later, willful to explain her expulsion reveals that, in spite of Colette's claims otherwise, the family desires Fanny's complicity in her inferiorisation to justify and facilitate their oppressive behaviour. Moudileno suggests that the oscillation in Fanny's behaviour towards proudness indicates that a former inferiority complex is replaced with one of superiority.[165] Yet the situation is far more complex as there are many contradictions within Fanny's attitude and behaviour which, I will argue, are linked to discrepancies within republican universalist discourse. As a result, the new path Fanny tries to take often converges with the oppressive one she wishes to escape.

By blaming her marginalisation on an act, namely the failure to ensure Léda welcomed her into the family, Fanny appears to reject the essentialising and inferiorising discourses espoused by her family. In turn, Fanny's quest for acceptance and equality through integration initially suggests that she is taking a new path in which she has overcome her sense of shame and refuses an inferior social position. However, Asibong demonstrates how Fanny, along with NDiaye's other racialised characters like Nadia from *Mon cœur à l'étroit* and Clarisse in *Ladivine*, merely represses her shame through the process of *blancness*.[166] Fanny's *blancness* is evident in, as well as her fantastic metamorphoses, the way the reader only learns about Fanny's experiences of shame and marginalisation before her quest through Colette and Fanny herself seems to have forgotten them. Blanking out these traumatic memories in what Asibong describes as a 'faux-naive pact' allows Fanny to forget, if only briefly, how she is irrevocably marked with racial and gender difference.[167] As this makes the promise of integration as an equal plausible once more, this

[164] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.152.
[165] Moudileno (1998), p.450.
[166] Asibong (2013), p.21.
[167] Ibid. p.22.

allows Fanny to convince herself that that she can be fully accepted and treated equally by the family. It is therefore not a superiority complex which motivates Fanny's quest for integration but her newfound and problematic belief in the promises of republican universalism as a result of her repression of any evidence to the contrary.

Yet Fanny has also not fully freed herself from the beliefs, ideas and practices that contribute to race and gender-based oppression in French society. Although her quest goes against her family's wishes for her to accept her inferiority and marginalisation, she remains overwhelmed by the desire to please them and other white characters. One of the ways in which NDiaye illustrates this is through the way Fanny is constantly and even excessively smiling at others who do not reciprocate, including amongst her family when she announces her quest.[168] It can also be seen in her behaviour towards Lucette when they first meet in the café as the latter serves her food: 'Fanny remercia excessivement, elle tendait les mains pour aider, se reculait, rentrait le cou dans la crainte de gêner'.[169] This depiction verges on the parodic as it underlines Fanny's eagerness to please the ethnic majority character, including by not displeasing Lucette through such efforts. Ahmed argues that the oppressed are encouraged to align their happiness, and consequently their will, with their oppressors' because this perpetuates the social hierarchies benefiting the privileged.[170] In the previous passage this manifests itself in Fanny's desire to spare Lucette any additional effort and then, in fear of irritating her in the process, of making herself as small and invisible as possible, like a hen ducking its head in the face of the proud French cockerel of the *Coq Hardi*. NDiaye expands upon this in Fanny's reaction to Lucette's gaze: 'Sous le regard un peu stupide de Lucette, Fanny se sentit écrasée, réduite, et rien ne lui sembla aussi important que de plaire à cette fille puissante et difficile'.[171] Here, NDiaye creates an implicit link between Lucette's oppressive behaviour, emphasised through terms such as crushing or reducing, and Fanny's wish to please her. This illustrates how Fanny values Lucette's approval because she has internalised Lucette's own sense of superiority to her. This is highlighted again when, explaining that Georges is her uncle, Lucette views Fanny with 'méfiance' and, as a result, Fanny 'se tut, et baissa les yeux'; an act that signals her subordinate position in their relationship.[172] Thus it is not just in spite of Lucette's inferiorisation and oppression of her but *because* of the power relations from which these arise that Fanny desperately wishes to please Lucette and therefore accepts the way she is restrictively immobilised and silenced at the *Coq Hardi*.

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[168] See NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.11-13.
[169] Ibid. p.68.
[170] See Ahmed (2010).
[171] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.72.
[172] Ibid. p.86.

Likewise, even though the family mistreats Fanny she still values their approval more than that of her fiancé Georges and his family who genuinely care for her. This exemplifies her identification with the oppressor, a form of internalisation that Karen Pyke argues perpetuates domination: 'The more the subjugated identify with the powerful, the more they accept the ruling values and structural arrangements that keep them down'.[173] Another example of this is Fanny's change in attitude to her role as the *Coq Hardi* cook. Although she first imagines that other girls from the village 'convoitaient sa place', she later looks upon Lucette's cafe as 'un lieu de convoitise' and 'se prenait à haïr sa petite cuisine'.[174] The repetition of the idea of 'coveting' a role or place conveys how Fanny begins to see her role as cook as inferior to Lucette's waitressing role. This is problematic because it, firstly, mirrors Lucette's attitude, closely linked to her inferiorisation of Fanny as fit for this role as an ethnic minority woman, and, secondly, diverts Fanny's attention from the structural inequalities which make such judgements possible. The potential implications of this are explored by NDiaye when Lucette suffers a suspicious death in which Fanny is potentially implicated, as though her desire for a better position and all that accompanies it may have driven her to murder. Bujor and Gaensbauer have demonstrated how Fanny, on becoming the *Coq Hardi* waitress, uncannily 'doubles' Lucette copying her behaviour.[175] As a result, she has internalised how such a role should be carried out and faithfully re-enacts restrictive gendered norms as she is careful to remain 'docile et pondérée' with the customers.[176]

Moreover, as a waitress Fanny now mistreats another ethnic minority woman, from the same village as her father, who has been hired as the new cook. In her fear that this woman might reveal her father's origins, Fanny traps her in the kitchen and, when she is leaving the café at the end of the working day, glares at her and pronounces 'quelques paroles méprisantes' in order to silence her.[177] In this vein, Fanny immobilises and silences this young woman by using the same techniques that Lucette had adopted with her. Further, just as none of the customers batted an eyelid when Lucette threw Fanny down the stairs, no one takes an interest in Fanny's abuse of another ethnic minority woman 'tant on se souciait peu de la cuisinière du Coq Hardi'.[178] Although Fanny now occupies her coveted role, NDiaye's depiction of her behaviour indicates her complicity in the maintenance of the social hierarchies which devalue and exploit ethnic minority women. Such behaviour can be identified as defensive othering, which Pyke describes as 'identity work engaged by the subordinated in an attempt to become part of the dominant group or to

[173] Pyke (2010), p.557.
[174] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.81, 84.
[175] Bujor, (2018) p.77; See Gaensbauer (2009), p.2016.
[176] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.107.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.

distance themselves from the stereotypes associated with the subordinate group'.[179] By treating her new colleague as an outsider, Fanny therefore hopes to distance herself from her ethnic origins and so resist 'the imposition of a negative identity'.[180]

The way Fanny forgets about her fiancé Georges also exemplifies the protagonist's *blancness* and defensive othering: she abandons Georges at the beginning of the novel and mistreats him when he seeks her out at the *Coq Hardi*. Her fear that being seen with him heightens her own 'singularité' in her family's eyes illuminates how she wishes to distance herself from others who are also produced as inferior.[181] Accordingly, she misguidedly looks to her ethnic majority family for the love and sense of belonging that her fiancé and his family offer her freely.[182] NDiaye again challenges the notion that minorities are responsible for the social division created in French society by contrasting Fanny's family's racism and sexism with the way Georges respects universalist abstraction: he is unashamed and almost unaware of the 'particularité' with which Fanny's family and their village mark him.[183]

After Fanny's first transformation which appears to remove her 'particularité', she seeks out her spurned fiancé and brings him back to the family's village, stating that she is 'très attaché à lui'.[184] However, her motives for reuniting with Georges are undermined by her desire to obey Colette 'en tous points', including by marrying Georges rather than Eugène.[185] Although she now appears perfect in her aunt's eyes, Fanny is still directed by the need for approval that imprisons her in the first half of the novel. Her metamorphosis can be seen as the embodied manifestation of her internalisation of inferiorising racist discourses and the resulting need to seek approval from the ethnic majority in ways that often denigrate or ignore the experiences of ethnic minorities. Indeed, Fanny places her own quest for belonging and equality above Georges' wellbeing as, recognising that he will face 'tourments' in her family's village, she nonetheless insists on having him with her because his 'particularité' can now 'mettre en valeur ma très satisfaisante nouvelle personne'.[186] As such, just as she abused her colleague at the *Coq Hardi*, Fanny willingly turns a blind eye to the discrimination that Georges faces. Fanny's transformation and internalised desire to please the white ethnic majority are thus in-keeping and complicit with the gendered and racialised social hierarchy that oppresses her and other minorities.

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[179] Pyke (2010), p.557.
[180] Ibid.
[181] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.214.
[182] See ibid. pp.220, 33.
[183] Ibid. p.220.
[184] Ibid. p.214.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

Fanny's internalisation of the universalist integration discourses of worthiness and gratitude also reinforces her subjugation. When she has 'des pensées méfiantes' about Lucette's abusive behaviour, Fanny is immediately filled with shame because she believes that she is 'plus d'une fois redevable' to Lucette for not excluding her.[187] Fanny's belief that she must be grateful that she is tolerated, just as prospective and new French citizens are expected to be 'indebted' to the nation because naturalisation is conceived as a favour, prevents her from questioning or challenging the oppression she faces.[188] Likewise, she believes, in spite of her quest for Léda, that she must demonstrate herself to be worthy of integration into the family by being 'paisible, humble, respectueuse'; the opposite of willful.[189] Incapable or unwilling to see that this worthiness is incompatible with equality because, in her family's eyes, it will always be reliant on her accepting her inferiority, she wonders what else she must do: 'à quoi me fallait-il encore accéder pour mériter d'être possédée par le village et la famille, irrévocablement…?'.[190] Along with her *blancness*, Fanny's internalisation of the both the idealistic promise of a demarginalising integration and the ambiguous notions of worthiness and gratitude blurs the reality that she will never be treated equally by her family or, by extension, the French nation because of how she is both gendered and racialised. Instead, these republican universalist discourses and a constantly deferred promise of equality through integration ensnare her in a double bind: directing her towards socio-economic immobility and silence whilst concealing the violence this involves.

Just as Fanny's belief that she must be grateful to Lucette silences her thoughts about the exploitation she faces, it also prevents her from grasping the true nature of the physical and often sexual violence she experiences. Lucette is often depicted as physically crushing Fanny, reducing her mobility as though trapping her in a cage, and NDiaye replicates this imagery in the portrayals of other characters, including when Uncle Georges and a truck driver rape Fanny and Colette leaves her little space in the boat in which she announces her exclusion.[191] When Lucette crushes her in their shared bed, Fanny 'était pourtant reconnaissante vaguement à Lucette de n'être point dégoûtée […] jamais Lucette n'avait d'hésitation au moment de rouler sur Fanny, ce pour quoi seulement Fanny l'aimait malgré les peines qu'elle subissait'.[192] Comparing Lucette's attitude with her family's disdain for her, Fanny believes that, as Bujor explains, 'cet écrasement témoigne de

[187] Ibid. p.79.
[188] See Mazouz (2019), p.144.
[189] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.61.
[190] Ibid. pp.61, 228.
[191] Ibid. p.149; Frye (1983), pp.4-5.
[192] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.103.

l'indifférence face à son étrangeté'.[193] This results, as before, in a misplaced sense of gratitude that means she accepts the oppression she suffers.

Nevertheless, such an interpretation is controverted by the author as this passage is followed shortly with Fanny's rape by her uncle Georges who 'la pressait si fortement qu'elle en fut incommodée', and by a truck driver she believes knows Léda who 'l'attrapa' and 'l'écrasait contre la vitre'.[194] The mirrored imagery of Fanny being repeatedly crushed stresses not just the violence but also the oppressive power relations at work behind each attack. Furthermore, the explicit connections made between these events, as the driver is described as behaving 'comme l'avait fait l'oncle Georges, ou Lucette', underlines that these actions are not 'unrelated phenomena, things that seem "just to happen" but are evidence of the 'the systematic nature of sexism and racism'.[195] Fanny is thus socially as well as physically immobilised by the crushing weight of the gendered and racialised social systems enacted through her aggressors' behaviour.[196]

Fanny is also immobilised and silenced by shock during these sexual assaults as she notes her uncle's actions with 'stupéfaction'.[197] On the one hand, Fanny's submission or freezing here is typical, as Gaensbauer notes, of the way victims often become 'docile' in the face of traumatic events.[198] On the other hand, it can also be linked to Fanny's internalised need to please and be approved by the ethnic majority. Speaking about Georges, Fanny 'le laisse faire' so that he would not complain about her to Colette, and she 'se gardait de freiner' the driver's actions because she thinks: 'bien qu'étant chez moi il ne convient pas que je dise comment se comporter, mais que je fasse la soumise et la modeste, content déjà de ne pas déplaire'.[199] This reveals how Fanny's internalisation of intersecting gendered and racialised norms, through discourses of worthiness and pleasing others, make her more vulnerable to abuse, including sexual assault, and make it harder for her to interpret and speak out about it as violence.

Noteworthy in the examples above is also how the detached narration passes over and so minimises these events as though they were micro-aggressions. Replicating the family's alienation of Fanny according to Gaensbauer, this narration underlines how Fanny's *blancness* is linked to a more widespread will-to-blindness in French society of the violence inflicted on ethnic minority

[193] Bujor, (2018) p.53.
[194] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.109, 20.
[195] Ahmed (2017), p.157.
[196] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.109.
[197] Ibid.
[198] See Gaensbauer (2009), p.219.
[199] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.109, 20.

women.[200] Yet, whilst the narrator seems complicit in overlooking the structural oppression faced by ethnic minority women in French society, the imagery of imprisonment and mirroring across several scenes employed by NDiaye resists this process which is described by Ahmed: 'We have learned to sever the connection between this event, and that, between this experience and that. To make a connection is thus to restore what has been lost (where loss should be understood as an active process); it is to generate a different picture'.[201] As NDiaye's literary tools illuminate the connections between violence that might otherwise be interpreted as unrelated or blamed upon the victim herself, they help foster an intersectional feminist consciousness of the structural power relations at work. In addition, they highlight how Fanny's attitude towards this violence is shaped by the concept of worthiness through pleasing others and is therefore the result of such power relations. NDiaye thus paints a picture which unveils and undermines an inegalitarian process and the deceptive republican universalist discourses employed to facilitate it.

Moreover, the mirroring of Lucette's behaviour with Georges', who had previously manifested his contempt for Fanny by tearing the photo of her as a child, suggests that the 'physical contact' from Lucette that Fanny appreciates is not incompatible with disgust for this ethnic minority woman. Indeed, this is evidenced in the attitudes of the male villagers towards her as a prostitute: 'un des hommes avait émis un ricanement grivois, sans que, pour autant, le mépris quittât son expression'.[202] Fanny's 'success' in her sex-work, as the embodiment of exotic femininity, functions through, rather than in spite of, the social hierarchy which makes her an object of derision and abjection because of her gender and origins. Ultimately, Fanny's desire to be 'possessed' by the village and her family arises from their value systems and numbs her to the true extent of the violence enacted upon her as she is socially, economically and physically exploited and abused, silenced and immobilised. In this way, NDiaye exposes how her protagonist's internalisation of ethnocentric patriarchal discourses, including those related to republican universalism, also serves to blur the inequality she faces and its sources and thereby facilitates her complicity with them.

Fanny's metamorphoses are the preeminent symbol of this process and its traumatic impact. Their fantastic nature foregrounds how the simultaneous desire to escape inequality in French society and Fanny's internalisation of the inferiorising discourses involved are fundamentally incompatible and cannot find a natural or realist solution. Instead, it is only in the realms of fantasy that the reality of the dissimulated and inescapable marking process can be (temporarily) overcome. Yet, as it is only Fanny rather than society as a whole who changes, the

[200] Gaensbauer (2009), p.212.
[201] Ahmed (2017), p.157.
[202] NDiaye (1990/2007), p.296.

inegalitarian social system and discourses in which this marking is imbricated remain in place. The dissipation of her newfound form after her first metamorphosis therefore suggests that the hope of equality and acceptance through integration is optimistic even within fiction. This is reinforced through her disintegration after her second transformative experience, which also highlights the internal damage involved. Facing the white French family and nation's abusive behaviour and internalising their exclusionary and treacherous discourses, including those of republican universalism, means that existence itself requires so much effort that it becomes destructive for ethnic minority women like Fanny.

Nevertheless, NDiaye's use of the fantastic among other literary techniques subverts this process which her protagonist is unable to overcome. Gaensbauer argues that the fantastic, including Fanny's metamorphoses and her distorted vision as see Georges and Lucette whilst she is raped by the truck driver, acts as a 'voix de femme' highlighting the gender-based violence Fanny faces and its traumatic impact.[203] This chapter's analysis of imagery, mirroring and intertextuality as well as the fantastic makes it possible to build upon Gaensbauer's research: all of these elements are mechanisms through which NDiaye explores not only gender but also race-based violence and the way it can be concealed through republican universalist discourses such as integration, worthiness and reciprocal rights and duties. By exposing intersecting power relations as well as their negative impact upon Fanny, NDiaye thereby develops the intersectional feminist consciousness which Fanny was unable to achieve and that might give others the tools to more successfully resist the kinds of power relations Fanny negotiates.

NDiaye's employment of the fantastic further undermines the marking process as Fanny's fantastic metamorphoses transgress the symbolic borders created by racialised categorisations entirely. In her analysis of Marie NDiaye's works, Snauwaert demonstrates that the variable colours and transformations of her characters depict their subjectivity as unstable and therefore not fitting within socially constructed boundaries such as race or gender.[204] Accordingly, the way in which Fanny is able to temporarily transform her appearance and remove the 'particularité' with which she is marked highlights the constructed nature of both this marking and the symbolic borders between self and other produced through this process. NDiaye's further invalidates reductive categories by blurring genre boundaries in the novel: through introducing fantastic elements into a predominantly realist text she rejects the limitations of either realism or the fantastic. This is in-keeping with the themes of fiction, reality and myth-making that are signalled through not only the fantastic but also the novel's intertextuality with *Don Quijote*. By exploring

[203] Gaensbauer (2009), p.221.
[204] See Snauwaert (2016).

how an inegalitarian, ethnocentric and patriarchal French society is mythologised as enacting republican universalist principles, NDiaye unmasks how the ethnic majority characters blur the boundaries of fiction and reality in order to construct and police a racialised and gendered universal. As such, NDiaye reveals how symbolic borders are both erected and transgressed to maintain unequal power relations and thereby disproves the supposedly intrinsic nature of such borders in the first place. Ultimately, *En famille* sheds light upon and challenges the discourses and social practices, including those of republican universalism, that create limiting and exclusionary boundaries in order to mask, justify and reproduce the oppressive directionality negotiated by ethnic minority women in France.

The Exposure and Subversion of Intersecting Inequalities and Deceptive Republican Universalist Discourses in French society

Although Fanny is ultimately unsuccessful in her quest for not just equality but also freedom and fraternity through integration, *En famille* illuminates and subverts the unequal power relations which are both its source and end point. Whilst implicit intertextuality with *Don Quijote de la Mancha* foregrounds the theme of tackling injustice, the mythologised nature of this tale also locates Fanny's particular experiences as a French ethnic minority woman within a universal framework. In this vein, Marie NDiaye centralises the story of someone who is marginalised and dismantles the process through which she is marked as particular and fetishised as a stranger in France. Through vivid imagery of imprisonment, *En famille* highlights how Fanny is caught between a network of interrelated barriers that produce her as inferior because of both her origins and gender, and facilitate her marginalisation, exploitation and exclusion.[205] NDiaye also employs imagery evocative of the slave trade to hint at continuity between Fanny's experiences in modern France and the colonised under the French Empire, including those who were enslaved. Meanwhile, the repeated mirroring of scenes in which the family and villagers oppress Fanny underlines the structural nature of the intersectional power relations involved. In this way, NDiaye portrays how Fanny is systematically directed towards immobility and silence in France as an ethnic minority woman, as emphasised through a fantastic topography which unravels any sense of progress.

Furthermore, the novel illustrates how unequal power relations are often enacted through, not just in spite of, republican universalism. When universalist notions, such as integration, worthiness and reciprocal rights and duties, are interwoven with inferiorising and

[205] See Frye (1983), pp.4-5.

exclusionary discourses, the deceptive promise or hope of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* actually facilitates Fanny's oppression in French society. Exploring this in relation to the intertextuality with *Don Quijote* has elucidated how this process, and the constant deferral of universalist promises, blurs reality to conceal the violence minorities face and the social hierarchies this upholds. Fanny has moments of perspicacity when she realises that she is in a double bind because she will neither be integrated nor tolerated unless she accepts the gendered and racialised identity and inferior socio-economic position imposed on her: 'est-il juste que je doive, moi, faire tant d'efforts, alors qu'il a suffi à Eugène de venir au monde?'.[206] The narrative thus highlights how the challenges of integration that Fanny faces are not those of assimilation but of sex and race-based discrimination transcending formal citizenship status or nationality. Yet the misleading nature of republican universalist discourses means that Fanny more easily internalises them and becomes driven by the need to please those most privileged and valued in French society. This leads to her complicity in this self-perpetuating process both in immobilising and silencing herself and other ethnic minorities. When Fanny seeks out a new path at the start of her quest for equality she is thus waylaid from the beginning by the contradictions between the promises of republican universalism and the reality of how they and other universalist concepts are employed to restrictively direct ethnic minority women in France.

Ultimately, unless the racist and sexist attitudes which pervade French society in the novel are dismantled, even a fantastic transformation will slowly be undone as Fanny doubts her own self-worth, integrity and rights. As she attempts one final metamorphosis, the unrelenting nature of the directing process appears to physically crush and press her, causing her identity and the hope of integration to ooze out of her, such that she is left an inert, disintegrated mass that can finally be disposed of and forgotten by her white family. Yet, whilst Fanny's family erase her existence and the way they deny her the republican universalist promises of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* from their memories, *En famille* powerfully and evocatively illuminates the violence and traumatism this involves. By encouraging an intersectional feminist awareness of this process, NDiaye thereby subverts the exclusionary and inferiorising discourses involved in her protagonist's oppression and the beguiling but treacherous republican universalist promises and discourses through which this is achieved. Furthermore, through fantastic transformations which transgress the borders produced between different groups of people and literary genres, this work exposes the constructed nature of such borders and undermines this notion which is central to justifying and reproducing inegalitarian power relations in modern-day France.

[206] NDiaye (1990/2007), pp.287-88.

Literature, Research and New Possibilities: Elucidating and Challenging a Universalist False Consciousness

Critically acclaimed authors Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê both express how their desire to elucidate and challenge violence and social injustice motivates and shapes their writing.[1] By applying an original intersectional framework to analyse their works, this thesis offers new insights into some of the ways in which the novelists achieve this goal. In particular, it has focused upon how they give a voice to ethnic minority women who are likely to face multiple forms of discrimination and inequality. Indeed, Lê and NDiaye depict how their ethnic minority female characters, whether exiles in Lê's novels or French nationals in NDiaye's, are routinely the victims of marginalisation, paternalism, exploitation, oppression and physical violence in French society. This research expands on single-axis approaches to NDiaye and Lê's *œuvres* by demonstrating how such violence is portrayed as arising from intersecting and widespread sex and race-based power relations.[2] Bringing the authors' novels together for the first time highlights the similarities in this picture of French society, and the reality of intersectional systems of domination, whilst also uncovering the differences that can exist between women's experiences. For example, Lê's Vietnamese exiles are more likely to be treated with paternalism and (sexually) commodified as exotic than NDiaye's protagonists who, often appearing to have African origins, face more open hostility as they are rarely tolerated or welcomed into the Hexagon. On the one hand, this may reflect the argument that Vietnamese exiles have been treated as the victims of communism rather than as unwanted migrants, as is often the case for those from France's former colonies.[3] On the other hand, it reveals that the dearth of research into the experiences of women with Vietnamese origins in French society, whether in sociological studies or in relation to literary or cinematic depictions, is highly problematic as these women are negatively affected by the same intersectional power structures. In shedding light on Lê's depictions of this issue, this thesis therefore aims to provide evidence of how adopting a similar intersectional lens in further research in feminist and postcolonial francophone studies would be both fruitful and necessary to understand and tackle discrimination and inequality in French society.

This project has also demonstrated how the novels explore violence and systems of oppression with regard to various concepts and discourses central to republican universalism, especially abstraction and integration. The authors' works illuminate how discourses and practices

[1] See Argand (1999); Chanda (2013); NDiaye (03/11/2009).
[2] See, for example, Huston (2004); Sarrey-Strack (2002).
[3] Kleppinger and Reeck (2018), p.5.

relating to republican universalism are inextricably intertwined with the everyday lives and social interactions of their ethnic minority female characters. Building upon existing scholarship on racism and abstraction in NDiaye's works, the first chapter revealed how portrayals of the widespread marking and fetishism of these women indicate the failure of the universalist principle of abstraction as a result of both sexism and racism.[4] This intersectional approach made it possible to expose how, whilst the national body is associated with whiteness, the universal body is also associated with masculinity. Understanding how these entities are not coterminous reveals how ethnic minority women's experiences are shaped by their exclusion from both symbolic bodies. It also uncovered how the 'non-dit' around racism identified in previous analyses of NDiaye's works facilitates discrimination and inequality as, by superficially respecting abstraction, ethnic majority characters conceal the racist nature of their attitudes and behaviour.[5]

The second and third chapters extended the analysis of the intersectional power relations shaping the lives of the ethnic minority female characters. They set out how these women are never integrated as equals in France because they are expected to submit their will to others, thereby adapting to restrictive and exploitative gendered and racialised norms, or face exclusion. Consequently, they argue that the characters' failed 'integration' was not the result of their supposed cultural differences but, instead, the product of sex and race-based discrimination and inequalities. This is true for Lê's characters who are brought up in a foreign culture as well as NDiaye's characters who have no multicultural upbringing. Adopting a contextualised approach underlines the significance of these depictions in the early 1990s when it was only towards the early 2000s that integration discourse and policy began to account for discrimination as a potential barrier to integration.[6] The fact that Lê and NDiaye's works challenged the prevailing doxa about integration at the time conveys the value of their contribution to knowledge on such issues and signals the continued need for research into literature and various mediums to gain a fuller understanding of French society and the experiences of those marginalised within it. These chapters also demonstrate how the oppression of ethnic minority female characters occurs through allegedly egalitarian universalist discourses, spanning from integration, worthiness, indebtedness and reciprocal rights and duties to deceptive promises of freedom, equality and fraternity. Building upon the foundation created in previous but isolated and single-axis analyses of abstraction or integration in Lê and NDiaye's novels thus makes it possible to draw important

[4] Jensen, (2017); Bujor, (2018).
[5] Behar (2013); Cotille-Foley (2009).
[6] See analysis in 'Abstraction and Integration' in the Introduction of how discourses around integration, even today, focus on cultural differencesand only begin to consider the role of discrimination in the late 1990s.

conclusions about their works and what they suggest about French society.[7] By exposing the oppressive directionality of a wide range of republican universalist concepts and discourses across various novels, these authors reveal the considerable extent to which these discourses are implicated in intersectional systems of domination. In turn, this indicates that such systems cannot be dismantled without a greater understanding of this imbrication.

In a similar vein, this thesis shows how Lê and NDiaye's works unveil the connections between modern social structures and universalist discourses, and those of France's imperial past. Reference to sociological works such as Pascal Blanchard's analysis of the relationship between the historical *mission civilisatrice* and modern-day integration policies elucidates how Lê portrays the power relations shaping the lives of her characters as a legacy of racist and sexist imperial discourses. She conveys how, through promises of freedom, equality, or fraternity, the protagonists are encouraged to embark on an oppressive and unattainable 'integration' process, a *mission civilisatrice* on French soil, long after the official end of the French Empire. Meanwhile NDiaye employs imagery that allegorically links the experiences of her female characters to those of African women caught up in the Atlantic slave trade. Considering the novels in relation to Sara Mazouz's ethnographic research into more recent naturalisation interviews, the second and third chapters also draw attention to how the characters are judged against pre-existing criteria that reinforces intersectional social hierarchies. Yet my research also applied the findings of such policy-related studies to a new area by examining how the novels' exploration of republican universalism conveys its relevance to everyday situations and relationships beyond specific processes such as that of naturalisation. This has further underlined the need to examine how republican universalism functions to understand the experiences of ethnic minority women and French society as a whole.

As NDiaye and Lê employ multiple literary tools, such as imagery, allegory, intertextuality and the fantastic, to illuminate the potentially deceptive and oppressive mobilisation of republican universalist concepts, this thesis has proposed that their novels express and foster the kind of intersectional feminist consciousness outlined by Sara Ahmed. She argues that it is necessary not just to understand the violence and oppression enacted through the intersections of racism and sexism but also how this is concealed through the 'languages of civility and love'.[8] Applying this to the novels and their particular French context has demonstrated how republican universalism can function in the same way as these deceptive languages: discourses and practices meant to safeguard *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* make these ideals unattainable for certain

[7] Bujor, (2018); Jensen, (2017); Selao (2007).
[8] See Ahmed (2010), p.86.

minorities within French society. In turn, pinpointing the variety of ways in which the authors convey this reality highlights how they actively encourage an intersectional feminist consciousness of these issues and their impact on ethnic minority women and other minorities in the nation home to universal human rights.

Awareness of how republican universalism is employed as an oppressive directing tool makes it possible to elaborate on the conclusions of previous research, in relation to both the French socio-political context and NDiaye's works, that this ideology constitutes a society-wide 'faux universalisme'.[9] As the novels go beyond depicting 'the gap between the ideology of universalism and the realities of everyday life' that reveals it to be false, republican universalism can be considered as a kind of 'false consciousness'.[10] Ahmed builds upon the work of feminist and Marxist thinkers to propose this concept as a means to understand how purportedly positive discourses, such as happiness, are used to restrictively direct society's interpretation of the world: 'there is something false about our consciousness of the world; we learn not to be conscious, not to see what happens right in front of us. Happiness provides as it were a cover, a way of covering over what resists or is resistant to a view of the world, or a worldview, as harmonious'.[11] Likewise, NDiaye and Lê's novels illustrate how republican universalist discourses, which portray French society as harmonious and offering *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, impede the characters' ability to see and comprehend what is happening in front of them: entrenched social division caused by the widespread discrimination and inequalities faced by gendered and racialised minorities. This contradicts arguments, which remain influential, that any divisions within French society are the result of external threats to republican universalism such as cultural differences or, specifically, Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism in the form of postcolonialism or intersectionality.[12] Considering the dialogue between the novels and their context therefore unveils the originality and pertinence of NDiaye and Lê's novels as they undermine and shed light on issues which continue to be masked and perpetuated through reference to republican universalism nowadays.

Significantly, Ahmed notes that false consciousness facilitates the reproduction of unequal social hierarchies: 'The key might not be so much the distinction between truth and falsity but the role of falsity in the reproduction of the truth. In other words, consciousness is false because it fails to coincide with itself, which is what allows a certain order to be reproduced, defining the

[9] See Delphy (1996 (2010)), p.319; Bujor, (2018); Jensen, (2017).
[10] Jensen, (2017) p.229.
[11] Ahmed (2010), pp.83-84.
[12] For more information on this argument, see 'Intersectionality and Republican Universalism: Incompatible or Reconciliable' in the Introduction.

horizon of intelligibility or truth'.[13] As a false consciousness imbricated in discourses of happiness blinds us to the reality of injustice, it facilitates the reproduction of this reality. Similarly, Lê and NDiaye's explorations of republican universalism through various themes, such as the blurring of fiction and reality or the mythologised rewriting of both the past and present, establish how a false social narrative reproduces social hierarchies. Indeed, this thesis has argued that universalist promises of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* that are never fulfilled are one of many tools through which ethnic minority female characters are restrictively directed towards silence and socio-economic immobility in French society. It has contended that the internalisation of this false consciousness by these women leads to their complicity in the exclusionary and inferiorising discourses of which they are the victims. Lê's use of imagery, as her characters are symbolically and viscerally torn apart by the ideas they have internalised, and NDiaye's use of the fantastic, as characters are disorientated and even disintegrate, highlight the traumatic impact of this internalisation. In portraying this issue, the authors expose the complex and self-perpetuating nature of the ethnocentric and patriarchal social systems facilitated through a republican universalist false consciousness. This conveys the authors' concern with elucidating not only the falsity or denial linked to republican universalism, themes already examined in research on NDiaye in particular, but also how this functions as an oppressive mechanism in French society.[14] Indeed, they unravel myths about the allegedly demarginalising, liberating and egalitarian nature of republican universalism to unveil how the discrimination and oppression experienced by ethnic minority women in France contravenes the Republic's professed principles and is often justified through them.[15]

Whilst NDiaye and Lê's novels offer a stark illustration of the implications of republican universalism as a false consciousness on their ethnic minority female characters, the intersectional feminist consciousness developed within and/or through the narratives is also a source of hope. Ahmed explains that a false consciousness 'blocks other possible worlds [..] such that possibles are lost before they can be lived, experienced, or imagined'.[16] Similarly, the inability to understand how current discourses around republican universalism restrict our thinking as well as our behaviour limits our ability to imagine alternative worlds. An intersectional feminist consciousness of this process, although not subversive in and of itself, can therefore be applied to

[13] Ahmed (2010), p.166.
[14] See, for example, Asibong (2013); Bujor, (2018); Brendlé, (2017).
[15] The section on 'Abstraction and Integration' in the Introduction considers how such an image of republican universalism is present in discourses of the 1980s and exemplified in Long (1988); Haut Conseil à l'intégration (HCI) (1991).
[16] Ahmed (2010), p.165.

seek alternatives to, and undermine the restrictive power relations protected through, a republican universalist false consciousness.

Likewise, NDiaye and Lê's novels resist the oppressive directionality of the universalist false consciousness they illuminate and look to alternative paths. Lê admits that, for her, literature 'doit naître d'un sentiment de rébellion […] contre ce qui a déterminé votre vie, contre ce qui vous est imposé. Il faut rompre les amarres, briser les carcans, qu'ils soient ceux qui, de l'extérieur, pèsent sur vous et ceux qu'on s'est forgés soi-même'.[17] Such rebellion involves not only exposing violence but also imagining the possible futures previously veiled by the false consciousness imposed upon society. This thesis has identified various ways in which the divisive, exclusionary and confining discourses which affect Lê and NDiaye's ethnic minority female characters are subverted. Just as the characters attempt to resist the injustices they face and the ways in which they are reductively marked and fetishised as outsiders, the novels blur the boundaries between reality and fiction and also between genres through use of the fantastic. Through intertextuality with mythologised tales, the authors also insert their ethnic minority female characters within a universal framework and so undermine attempts to confine their experiences and identities to the margins as particular. Their employment of the fantastic and open-endings creates a certain 'incompréhension' which again refuses the desire to 'grasp' others and their narratives that is intrinsic to the process of stranger fetishism.[18] Moreover, it creates an openness which stimulates the imagination as to the 'possibles' that can exist for the characters in the future and what kind of (new) path they might take.[19]

In relation to resistance, Lê explains that her female characters 'sont des femmes qui ont du mal à faire entendre leur voix, des personnages qui sont toujours en lutte'.[20] This highlights the challenges these women face in making their experiences of othering and oppression in French society heard. Research, as with literature, has an important role to play in tackling this product of inequality. This thesis has sought, like the authors, to demarginalise the voices of ethnic minority women through its theoretical framework, citational practice, and its attention to the authors' voices as well as those of the ethnic minority female characters. This has contributed new insights into the characters, texts and their context in relation to the role of republican universalism in oppressive social systems and, as a result, the experiences of ethnic minority women in French society. Such research also points to the lacunae that remain in our understanding of something

[17] Angela Krieger, 'Correspondence with Linda Lê', in *L'Être des lettres : Linda Lê's compositions of form,* ed. by Angela Krieger (Paris: University of Londin Institute in Paris, 2010), p.236.
[18] Kaprièlian (2009).
[19] Ahmed (2010), p.165.
[20] Ni Cheallaigh (2013).

which has such a significant impact on these women and French society as a whole. In the case of NDiaye and Lê's works, there is scope for expanding the theoretical framework adopted here to a larger range of their works or how other sites of intersection shape the characters' experiences, such as disability or sexuality. Considering the development of the Pygmalion paradigm as a means to explore intersectional directionality across Lê's *œuvre* could prove an especially fruitful way to shed further light on these issues. Meanwhile, cross-cultural comparisons with other ethnic minority female characters' experiences could add further nuance to the arguments made in this thesis. Whilst Mame-Fatou Niang's analysis of depictions of black women from the *banlieues* explores how republican universalism shapes their daily lives, there is still very little research on this issue.[21] The voices of Vietnamese women in particular, as noted earlier, also remain predominantly unstudied and unheard in sociological research generally as well as in relation to republican universalism. There is therefore great scope for carrying out intersectional research across multiple disciplines to demarginalise, and differentiate between, the experiences of ethnic minority women and, simultaneously, contribute to knowledge of republican universalism and how it functions in everyday contexts.

Yet the emphasis that Lê places on giving a voice to those who are silenced is also accompanied by a reference to resistance. By noting how her characters are 'toujours en lutte', she signals their refusal of any reductive victim narrative and conveys their hope of forging less oppressive paths. In a work on the use of anger in literature, Lê argues that writers have an important role to play in the rebellion against violence and injustice:

> Ceux-là ont pour rôle d'empêcher l'homme de s'assoupir dans sa normalité. Leur colère, leur rage, leur furie, quel que soit le nom que nous donnons à leur révolte, est ce qui nous porte en avant, fait de nous des irréconciliés, des irrésignés, si les berceuses consolantes ne nous ont pas définitivement endormis.[22]

Similarly, Lê and NDiaye's novels attempt to awaken their readers from normality and to counter the 'berceuses consolantes' of republican universalism which mask and perpetuate gender and race-based discrimination and inequality in France. Their anger at, and exposure of, violence and injustice can therefore become productive by making their readers 'des irréconciliés, des irrésignés' who reject this reality.[23] Regardless of the success of their characters, Marie NDiaye and Linda Lê's writing encourages us not only to see but also to challenge the reality of violence and its reproduction through republican universalism within and beyond literature. By stimulating an intersectional feminist consciousness through their works, they thus invite us to imagine new

[21] Niang (2019).
[22] Lê (2021), p.80.
[23] Ibid.

ways of conceiving and enacting the universalist principles of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* such that they pass from a treacherous myth into an inclusive and egalitarian reality.

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