



Migration, reparation, dictation: Faïza Guène's *La discrétion* engages the offence of oversight

Alison Rice¹

Received: 8 November 2024 / Revised: 29 October 2025 / Accepted: 31 October 2025 /
Published online: 10 December 2025
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Abstract

In her sixth novel, *La discrétion*, Faïza Guène paints the fragmentary fictionalized portrait of her own mother, a 70-year-old Algerian-born woman who goes unnoticed in many contexts in contemporary France where she has lived for forty years. The violent memories of her childhood during the Algerian War intertwine with the realities of her daily life in the Parisian suburbs and the challenges faced by her children show how difficult it can be to find a place in this country when you hail from an Arab and Muslim background. This book emerged from the deep emotion the author felt when she formulated the phrase “Mort de discrétion” to describe her own father’s passing. This articulation of the end of a migrant’s life is in fact the culmination of multiple erasures, humiliations, and injustices that have accumulated over the years and, in response, Guène turns in an unprecedentedly personal text to focus on her mother in order to “repair the offense of oversight,” give voice to a woman who has too often been silenced, and work through the past to lessen the effects of “transgenerational trauma” by reviving stories and preserving them for posterity.

Keywords Migrant · Women · France · Algeria · Postcolonial · Faïza Guène

The title of Faïza Guène’s sixth novel appears innocent on the surface. It carries connotations of proper, reserved, inoffensive behavior that would befit an individual who observes the rules of a particular situation and refrains from divulging revealing details. The maternal figure in this book is the very embodiment of such restraint, serving as the quintessential example of a person who does not wish to rock the boat, who is content to defer to others and to fade into the background. But this desire

✉ Alison Rice
arice1@nd.edu

¹ University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA

to not *stand out* means that she also neglects to *stand up* for herself, opting instead to quietly accept whatever treatment she receives, in any context, even when it is demeaning. This consistent self-effacement is the attitude that defines the 70-year-old exiled mother in *La discrétion*. It is her adopted approach to life in a society that eludes her comprehension, her calculated stance in a country whose codes remain inscrutable to her, even though she arrived here 40 years ago from Algeria in order to be the wife of an Algerian man who had moved across the Mediterranean much earlier for work. Despite decades spent on its soil, this woman still hasn't found her footing in France, and she maintains the mindset of a migrant who intends to return to her homeland.

It isn't until the very end of the book, where an elaborate list of italicized dedications is found, that the true impact of the title comes through: "*À la mémoire de mon père, Abdelhamid Guène (1934–2013) Mort de discrétion*" (Guène 2021, p. 227). The author's own father has passed away, according to these brief lines, precisely *because of* this characteristic: he has died *due to* discretion, just as someone might perish from lung cancer or heart disease. In a twist, what might initially appear to be a laudable mannerism has turned fatal. The presence of this blunt diagnosis in the dedicatory phrases—found alongside the final page of upbeat prose—is stunning at the conclusion of this publication. The juxtaposition of the closing paragraphs and this announcement of death brings together in stark terms the fictional and the factual. Clear affirmation of the relationship between the titular concept that drives the creative text and the real-life consequences of this eponymous discretion that has always defined the author's parents is found in the paratextual apparatus. Straddling the divide between the inventive freedom of the written work and the explications that the author provides outside her corpus is a movement that proves to be particularly striking in this work. The foremost message with which the author leaves her readers is that the title's term is devastatingly influential, and that its effects on her own life are irreversible.

This literary creation was inspired by a significantly shorter text that the author had composed for the radio. In an interview, Guène relates that when she had to read aloud the phrase "Mort de discrétion" for this audio performance, she was deeply moved by its revelation: "cela m'a remuée, comme un choc très fort en moi" (Bouchenni, 2020). Witnessing the disdainful dismissal of her parents in settings that ranged from the managerial to the medical stirred up the wrath of Guène when she was a teenager: "À l'adolescence, j'ai commencé à voir mes parents confrontés au mépris des médecins, de l'administration. Je ne mettais pas de mot dessus, ça me faisait mal, ça me mettait en colère. Je percevais en revanche leurs sacrifices pour nous. Je n'ai pris conscience que tardivement de l'infériorisation provoquée par cette discrétion" (Bouchenni, 2020). Finding the terms to name the wrongs that have been committed is crucial in these comments by the adult author who looks back on her adolescent years, and it is a movement that occurs within the novel as well, when the grown daughter Hannah, one of three girls and a boy born in France to Yamina and Brahim Taleb, meets with a psychoanalyst who provides her with an empowering vocabulary: "Ces mots ont résonné en Hannah comme une véritable révélation. Enfin, elle a des mots" (Guène 2021, p. 201). Placing words on the painful sensations

that she has not managed to express prior to these therapy sessions is a significant development for the character who listens avidly to this expert:

Ça lui fait du bien d'entendre : *C'est normal, cette violence fait partie de votre histoire, vous portez en vous la violence et les humiliations vécues avant vous, d'une certaine façon, vous en héritez. C'est normal que vous soyez en colère, cette colère qui a été longtemps réprimée, tout ça, c'est très injuste, et l'injustice, de fait, ça met profondément en colère.*

Vous ne pouvez pas porter seule tout ce poids. Vous ne pouvez pas réparer seule l'offense.

Réparer l'offense. (Guène 2021, p. 201)

The expression “Réparer l'offense” recurs twice on this page, constituting a refrain of sorts that underscores the impact this turn of phrase has on Hannah, a devoted daughter who has always felt an ineffable need to make up for the affronts her parents have suffered.

Faïza Guène has likewise felt a compulsion to defend her father and mother from the ridicule to which they have so often been subjected. But the precise wrong that she feels most keenly is one she formulates as follows in an interview, “Il faut surtout réparer l'offense de l'oubli.” Of all the crimes that have been committed against her progenitors in colonial and postcolonial contexts, Guène is convinced that the misdeed that cries out most compellingly for rectification is the one that *omits* them, that *overlooks* them, that threatens to let their very existence fall into *oblivion*. The author refers to this as the “offense de l'oubli,” and I have chosen to translate the phrase as “the offence of oversight,” taking into account two possible meanings for the latter term, in accordance with an understanding that the societal system in the France has exhibited two seemingly contradictory stances: a failure to notice these members of their community *and* an attitude requiring supervision and surveillance, ultimately exerting control over these immigrants.

In the dreams that she recounts to her analyst, the protagonist named Hannah tells of her efforts to save from a freezing Seine River the bodies that are floating therein. While this sequence alludes to the many Algerians who died in Paris during the violent police repression of their peaceful demonstration on the 17th of October, 1961, it is her father's face that emerges most prominently and which subsequently fades away in her dream, losing its distinctiveness as she desperately seeks to save his life. Providing features to those who will otherwise blend into the background, accentuating the narrative arcs of the lives of people who have not made a name for themselves in France is a movement Faïza Guène espouses with enthusiasm in all of her written works, which have frequently focused on stories of immigrant families from the Maghreb who reside on the outskirts of French cities, most often the capital. If autobiographical elements have found their way into some of the details of Guène's first five books—beginning with her bestselling breakthrough hit, *Kiffe kiffe demain*, which took the Parisian literary landscape by storm in 2004 and catapulted the author to international fame thanks to a multitude of translations—this gesture of telling

the tales of those who have not often figured in French literature takes on particular poignancy in *La discrétion* because of the specificity of the parental protagonists, and the care with which the narrator turns to the story of the mother.

Migration

Literary representations of immigrants to Europe do not abound, but there is a deplorable dearth of depictions of women who have come from elsewhere to the continent, as Mustapha Harzoune (2015) notes in his overview of the topic in French-language texts: “La littérature, à l’instar des études sociologiques ou historiques, n’a pas été hospitalière à la figure de l’immigrée.” Exceptions to this general statement can be found in the literary and cinematic creations of Yamina Benguigui and in the prolific publications of Leïla Sebbar, who was the first to focus on Algerian women immigrants in France, as well as in the much more recent work of Alice Zeniter, among others. But the truth is that matriarchs from Algeria have not been at the center of literature depicting immigrants in France, as Faïza Guène argues in an interview for *The Guardian*: “There are a few memoirs, and studies by historians or sociologists, about immigrant Algerian workers in France. These [men] had a role to play, even if they were exploited, whereas the women stayed at home. So we never heard from them. It was important to me that a woman like that should be the central character of my story” (Reisz, 2022). If immigrant women from North African countries weren’t heard from in the public sphere in France, they often weren’t very vocal in private either, at least not in Guène’s experience. She realized one day that she didn’t know her mother’s story, though she had regularly listened to her mother evoke her father’s role in the resistance in Algeria, and the author therefore asked her about her first childhood memory. A harrowing account of the invasion of their home by a dozen French soldiers whose interrogation of the women present led one of them in put a machine gun to her baby brother’s head. An excruciatingly long moment of indecision marked the family forever, holding them in its grip for years and years after the soldiers finally lowered their arms and left the premises in their jeep convoy. When she heard her mother describe this early experience, Faïza Guène knew she had to write of it, in an effort to commit to memory the major moments of her existence, following this life-altering traumatic event which thrust her with brutality into another age. The concluding line of this chapter puts it succinctly: “L’enfance de Yamina est déjà terminée” (Guène 2021, p. 44).

If the mother figure in Guène’s literary work, like her own mother, suffered a truncated childhood due to the threat the French soldiers posed to the life of her baby brother, the fictionalized children she has given birth to in France have contrastingly prolonged childhoods. They may have become legal adults, but they are still seeking their paths, both professionally and personally, finding it difficult to land fulfilling employment and to find thrilling love lives. Yamina’s offspring are discovering that they are bothered by lingering, intermingling issues with which they must come to terms, and it is the daughter named Hannah who is struggling with them most avidly: “Toutes ces choses sourdes à l’intérieur, sûrement plus difficiles à démêler” (Guène 2021, p. 174). The things that are troubling her because they have not been articulated

aloud are similar to the unformulated elements of her mother's life, the result of her decision to embrace silence: "Yamina est née dans un cri. Alors pourquoi choisir de mener une existence silencieuse? (Guène 2021, p. 30). The interpretation that is teased out throughout *La discrétion* attributes this stifling of expression to a profound feeling of anger: "Mais la colère, même enfouie, ne disparaît pas. La colère se transmet, l'air de rien" (Guène 2021, p. 16). While the parents might have hoped to spare their children the pain of deep-seated anger by not speaking of it, the silence they adopted only exacerbated this sentiment in their children. It was precisely because they didn't believe that they had the right to talk of injustices both past and present that they could *sense* that something was amiss without possessing the capacity to translate what was wrong into words. This is why the permission Hannah's psychoanalyst gives her to feel the anger that she has inherited from her parents is such an important development.

Cette colère, ses parents se sont pourtant évertués à l'étouffer en eux. Ils se sont donné tellement de mal pour la dissimuler, pour en protéger Hannah, ses sœurs et son frère.

Yamina et Brahim ont beau faire semblant que tout va bien, que l'injustice se surmonte sans conséquences, les impacts même invisibles existent, et maintenant ils sont dans la chair de Hannah. Ils lui brûlent la peau, ces impacts. [...]

Si elle se trouve un jour un abruti qui accepte de lui faire des gosses, Hannah ne veut pas qu'ils héritent de cette colère qui lui dévore les tripes. (Guène 2021, p. 174)

Hannah is inspired to determine the cause of her innermost anger thanks to her hope to one day have children of her own. Her parents have smoothed over their strong feelings in the face of racist debasement because of a desire to protect their offspring, but Hannah must tackle the transgenerational trauma that she and so many others like her have nonetheless inherited from colonization, war, exile, and ongoing exposure to humiliating treatment.

In Guène's understanding of the phenomenon, the expression of inherited experience may take on visceral form: "Je crois beaucoup à ce qu'on appelle la mémoire génétique, ou les traumas transgénérationnels. On hérite de choses qui ne nous sont pas racontées. C'est très fort et cela nous fait deviner la douleur, les sacrifices, c'est dans notre chair. Ces choses s'expriment parfois par le corps" (Bouchenni). A possible remedy to these ailments can be located in the telling of the stories that have been stifled, these experiences that risk slipping into oblivion if they aren't recounted. Guène was aware that asking her mother to talk about her memories, such as her exile in Morocco as a young child during the war, might stir up difficult feelings, but she believes her mother perceived the importance of sharing these parts of her past once she began speaking of them. And Guène seized the opportunity to transpose these tales into a literary text, remaining faithful in chapters devoted to her mother's lived experience in a composition that shifts between this biographical account and

an imagined representation of parental interaction with four fictional children set in present-day France.

The timing of this sixth novel by Guène is significant, as Christina Horvath points out when she suggests that the offspring “of Maghrebi parents” must realize that their “task is actively to excavate and reassemble the fragments of the untold stories before their parents’ passing” (2022, p. 245). The aforementioned paratextual tribute to the author’s deceased father at the conclusion of *La discretion* underscores the importance of learning the details of familial histories while those who lived them are still alive, and the advanced age of the maternal figure in this book is accentuated. Her mother is no longer young, and Guène boldly places her at the heart of this literary work which highlights her mother’s experience and works against the move toward the “*effacement*” that reigns among immigrants from the Maghreb in the French context, as Catherine Brun argues: “Guène prend l’exact contrepied de Yamina et de ses frères et sœurs en discrétion” (2024, p. 135). The migrant experience is given particular punch in this lively literary work that blends the mother’s factual accounts and her interactions with fictional children seeking to navigate France today.

Reparation and transformation

It is meaningful that Faïza Guène has focused on the concept of reparation to describe the movement embodied in this novel. A number of critics have focused of late on what Florian Cord has analyzed as “a broad theoretical mode and general cultural sensibility” (2024, p. 3), the “defining prefix” of which is “‘re’ (recomposing, reattaching, reassembling, reimagining, restoring, reworlding, etc.)” (p. 4). While Cord identifies repair as decidedly different from “critique” which is connected to the prefix “‘de’ (denaturalizing, demystifying, decoding, deconstructing, decentering, etc.),” Jeremy De Chavez argues that “advocating for reparative reading need not be an abdication of the ethico-political commitments of postcolonial critique” (2023, p. 219). Guène calls attention in *La discrétion* to the colonial ills that her mother suffered in Algeria, beginning with the scene of life-threatening resonance that constitutes her first recollection.

The chronological flexibility of Guène’s text creates an unpredictable reading experience that is informed by detailed headings, with places and dates provided at the outset of each chapter. Readers are plunged into previous punctual moments in the personal history of the mother, dating back to the year of her birth in 1949, and they repeatedly return to the present, the year 2020, while visiting eventful developments throughout the seven decades of Yamina’s life. The resulting text is never dull, maintaining a movement that has readers wondering which epoch and which location will greet them in each new section of this work. This text may be especially well suited to “reparative reading” which, according to De Chavez, “cultivates attentiveness to the temporal mechanisms of the worlding of a literary text—that is to say, the power of the literary text to open up other worlds through the force of time—in the historical present” (De Chavez, 2023, pp. 219–220). Like other critics who are focused on the reparative, De Chavez is attuned to the affective implications of this approach, pointing to the “possibility of an affective community across social and temporal differ-

ences” (De Chavez, 2023, p. 237). Guène contemplates notions of the universal and the particular in an interview on this novel, attributing to the nineteenth-century Russian author Leo Tolstoy the following quote: “Si tu veux parler de l’universel, parle de ton village” (Bouchenni, 2020). Her interpretation of this citation is that it is up to her and other offspring of immigrants who have internalized the guilt of their parents to emerge from this sentiment that has been imposed by “le système dominant” in France. In this nation where belonging to a community is so often discouraged, you feel chastised if you write first of all for those of your background, but this shouldn’t be the case, if we take Tolstoy at his word: “Tu as l’impression d’être du mauvais côté si tu dis ‘J’écris d’abord pour les miens’. Alors que c’est tout le contraire. Parle de ton village, tu parleras au monde entier” (Bouchenni, 2020).

The question of place and belonging—the question of origins—is evoked in these comments by the author and it is alluded to in various ways throughout *La discrétion*. In one heated mother-daughter exchange, Yamina intends to calm her daughter down when she tells her that this is the way things are in France: “C’est comme ça benti, on doit accepter, on est comme leurs invités, on est chez eux” (Guène 2021, p. 116). But the daughter will not accept this assertion that they are guests in this country, that they are not at home here: “Nous, on est chez nous ! On est nés ici ! Et si on est arrivés là, c’est pas par pure coïncidence !” (Guène 2021, p. 116). Hannah contends in this exclamatory response that not only were she and her siblings born here and therefore can lay claim to citizenship, but she also asserts that their family did not come to this nation without some reason, making it clear through this argument that it is no coincidence that they arrived in this particular place. Indeed, their migrant movement to France is undeniably tied to this country’s colonizing conquest of their land.

While she admits to feeling a bit baffled by the discretion her parents have always displayed in France, Guène also sees that this approach to their daily life could be interpreted as a “form of resistance,” a refusal to be brought down by the scorn and humiliation they have encountered in so many settings (Bouchenni, 2020). On another level, immigrants like her mother and father are not very familiar with the social codes that surround them and have often felt incapable of defending their interests in this European location. What’s more, a number of them held onto the hope of going back to their country, anticipating an imminent return to their homeland, and therefore didn’t experience the need to engage with what they considered to be temporary, short-lived mistreatments in the public sphere in France. What comes to her mind when Guène evokes this expectation is Ulysses and “le mythe du retour,” the enduring myth of return that has held her parents and so many others in their sway, a persistent legend that means that it is rather miraculous, in her estimation, that her generation has found a way out of a situation that remained unnamable, indeed incomprehensible, for so long (Bouchenni, 2020).

What Guène has succeeded in doing so effectively is finding a way to transform into words, into writing, the revolt that she felt growing within her as an adolescent who saw her parents disregarded. She has focused on engaging in revolutionary acts of the mind, not only creating novels but also films, and recently contributing to the construction of narratives for television series such as the 2022 *Oussekine*, a mini-series for Disney+ devoted to telling the story of the titular 22-year-old French-Algerian student who was beaten to death by police in 1986 during a student demon-

stration in Paris. Reacting to violence in all of its forms is what galvanizes Guène and others of her generation: “C’est un miracle qu’on soit en capacité de se révolter intelligemment, en écrivant des livres, en faisant des films, parce que c’est vraiment une injustice sans nom qu’ils ont vécue” (Bouchenni, 2020). It is revealing that Guène does not speak solely for herself. She does not see her work as belonging to her alone, as a solitary and singular authorial figure, but as part of a larger movement to which she encourages others to add their voices. The very personal story of her mother, which she brings to life in her sixth novel is not the only tale worth telling, and she emphasizes that she hopes others will do the same, seeking out and holding onto their family heritage:

‘*La discrétion*’, c’est un relais de mémoire pour l’auteure elle-même qui encourage régulièrement ses lecteurs issus de cette immigration à questionner leurs parents, à les faire parler, à transmettre leurs récits pour les générations à venir. ‘*À chaque generation, il y a des histoires qui se perdent et si on ne fait pas ce travail-là, il y a des chances qu’elles ne deviennent que de vieilles légendes*’, déplore-t-elle (Bouchenni).

Guène’s passionate plea in favor of valorizing these stories echoes the thought expressed by a character in Alice Zeniter’s textual exploration of her own family’s connection to Algeria. The potential for loss is present in the very title of *L’Art de perdre*, this tome that conveys the conviction that what isn’t thoughtfully conserved from a family’s memory will be consigned to oblivion: “Ce qu’on ne transmet pas, ça se perd, c’est tout” (Zeniter, 2017, p. 497).

If the central character in *L’Art de perdre*, Naïma, takes a trip to her parents’ native Algeria for the first time because her employer has sent her there, this is not the case for the children of Yamina in *La discrétion* who regularly travel to their parents’ homeland during summer breaks and have come to know their extended family through these visits. One of these daughters listened with rapt attention to an elderly aunt whose storytelling techniques held all in her thrall: “Avec ses tatouages tribaux, sa gestuelle et sa voix rauque, elle ressemblait à une ogresse des contes anciens sous les lueurs de la lune. Fatima était un as des *hajiyates*, les histoires traditionnelles et autres devinettes qui se disent en rimes. Malika en a noté quelques-unes dans un carnet à spirales, elle trouvait dommage que ça se perde” (Guène 2021, p. 165). This desire to get these stories down, to put them to paper, to preserve them for posterity, is of dire importance to this protagonist who laments that her mother is nowhere to be found on the Internet when she launches a search: “Il n’y a aucune trace de Yamina et de son enfance, aucun de ses récits n’y apparaîtrait, pas le moindre de ses souvenirs” (Guène 2021, p. 181). When she studies a website that provides the last names of students from the class of 1964, she hopes to discover her mother’s maiden name among them: “*Madouri*, M-A-D-O-U-R-I, ce nom, qui lui aussi mériterait d’être inscrit, d’être consigné dans un registre, ce nom qui lui aussi mériterait qu’on s’en souvienne et qu’on le mentionne avec émotion” (Guène 2021, p. 183). In contrast to some of the facts and photos she found online, there appears to be no trace of Yamina’s experience in Algeria and all that remains is “une histoire fragmentée,” a past made up of far too few disparate, disjointed family memories (Guène 2021,

p. 184). Malika is convinced that it is because no one made the effort to write down this history, and because no one documented dates and names, that today not a single tangible trace of her family heritage remains.

Yamina's daughter Malika believes that it would be delightful, even just briefly, to feel like she had a home somewhere: "*ça doit être bien, rien qu'une fois, de se sentir chez soi quelque part*" (Guène 2021, p. 183). Like so many with ancestral ties to Algeria, she could be said to have a "cultural identity" located "in the deeply internalized liminal spaces of the personal and collective realms of memory" that "all those embarked on the postcolonial migrant journey" must "carry with them throughout their lives" (McGregor, 2021, p. 90). The feeling of not fitting in, of not having a clear sense of affiliation, haunts this personage.

The capacity of creative work to contribute to reparation in cases like this may depend on its implicit argument in favor of "a new way of thinking about group membership and belonging that does not reproduce, however unintentionally, systems of exclusion founded on preconceptions about race, gender, nation, or culture," a way of thinking that instead celebrates the possibilities of "transcultural hybridities" and draws upon the "spatial metaphor of the 'in-between'" that necessarily describes the situation of protagonists such as Malika and Hannah (Roupakia, 2022, p. 105). Like these characters who were born in France to Algerian parents, Naïma in *L'Art de perdre*, remains in transit, even after having finally made it to Algeria, as the text's final words insist: "Elle n'est *arrivée* nulle part [...] elle est mouvement, elle va encore" (Zeniter, 2017, p. 506). If Hannah is quick to emphasize that she and her siblings were born in France and should feel as if they were at home there, the reality of their treatment is that they are constantly reminded of their foreign-born parental heritage. This perception is unfortunately in harmony with the calling cards Faïza Guène has been dealt in her country. A desire to place her in the category "phénomène de société," with a continual categorization "dans le rôle de 'la fille de banlieue qui écrit'" bears witness to the specificity of this reception in this location: "En France, elle reste prisonnière de ses origines" (Subtil, 2006). Unlike in other countries, ranging from Sweden to the United States, where she has been welcomed and asked to engage in conversations on questions ranging from the creation of her characters to the construction of the text, critics in France have wished to place all of the stress on Guène's social class and immigrant background, labelling her definitively according to these superficial classifications.

Reparation and memorialization

The possibility of concocting creative works that embody "intelligent revolt," to take up Faïza Guène's formulation, is integral to the undertaking of "counter-storytelling, an interdisciplinary methodology employed to challenge hegemonic narratives" through the embrace of "a narrative composed in an autobiographical, biographical, or composite genre that centers the experiences of marginalized individuals" (Henry, 2022, p. 300). It would be difficult to imagine a more apt description of *La discrétion*, a work that Marie-Pierre Ulloa would likely qualify as a "roman qui s'impose [...] comme réparation d'un manque historiographique" (Henry, 2022, p. 11) through the

emphasis on an individual life. Guène emphasizes that these stories that make up her familial history are part of a larger national History, and it is time that France accept this. The implications of the publication of a novel like this one in the Parisian literary landscape are present within its pages: “Qu’ils héritent de leur histoire glorieuse ! Des récits de leurs luttes ! Qu’ils soient fiers d’être qui ils seront !” (Guène 2021, p. 174). Guène contends in interviews that her children will benefit from the affirmation of their cultural and familial histories found within this novel, a text which responds in many ways to what the character Malika was clamoring for, and that fulfills a need that critics have expressed as follows: “désir d’archive et de la nécessité d’archive inscrite sur la page” (Ulloa, 2022, p. 11). The book itself becomes an archive, and it presents a lasting indictment of the wrongs that have been committed, performing the seemingly oxymoronic task of highlighting effacement: “The framework of fiction offers an alternate route to critical detachment when examining social processes, historical erasures, and inequities” (Ghosal, 2023, p. 250). Forms of rectification become possible through creative writing which fills in some of the gaps with details that are flagrantly missing from so many official records.

In his wide-ranging study of French literature in the twenty-first century titled *Réparer le monde*, Alexandre Gefen argues compellingly that recent years have borne witness to the emergence of an understanding of writing and reading as “therapeutic,” as possessing qualities that help us to overcome some of the ills that characters like Hannah grappled with in Guène’s novel: “une littérature qui guérit. Qui soigne, qui aide” (Gefen, 2017, p. 9). Gefen’s understanding of the new sorts of protagonists who take their place on these pages is in line with the developments of Guène’s recent work, without a doubt: “Les individus fragiles, les oubliés de la grande histoire, les communautés ravagées sont les héros de la fiction française contemporaine” (Gefen, 2017, p. 9). The literary endeavors that characterize our epoch are motivated by a belief that they hold in common with Faïza Guène, that oversight is indeed an offence, and that forgetting constitutes a crime: “Toute forme d’oubli semble une injustice et un crime métaphysique” (Gefen, 2017, p. 239). But repair is within reach, and the “réparation mémorielle” that the text is capable of achieving when it aspires to the universal (Gefen, 2017, p. 251) is an endeavor that recalls the aforementioned emphasis that Florian Cord places on the prefix “re” and the positive terminology that it is a part of, when it is integrated into our expectations for writing and reading: “demander à l’écriture et à la lecture de réparer, renouer, ressouder, combler les failles des communautés contemporaines, de retisser l’histoire collective et personnelle” (Gefen, 2017, p. 11). What contemporary literary projects seek to do is make a difference in the world, placing words on what has been lost, both figuratively and literally, in order to create the conditions for healing to occur: “Sauver ou agir, même modestement, sur nos souffrances individuelles ou nationales, par la parole littéraire en tant qu’elle est adresse ou libération, par la fiction en tant qu’elle peut mettre des mots sur le perdu ou l’indicible, chercher à cerner et à intervenir sur les blessures du monde” (Gefen, 2017, p. 11). The questions regarding genre that Gefen raises in this analysis highlight the possibility of opening up to novel forms and transformative practices, and of considering formulations to be literary that may not have been interpreted as such in previous eras. This is where Guène’s sixth book—with its rhythmic prose, filled with punchy insights and insightful punchlines, com-

bined with its recourse to alternating chapters that don't hesitate to deviate from any expected sense of order—contribute to destabilizing previous standards. They also adhere to the innovations of autobiographical texts in the present that Gefen identifies as contributing to “the affirmation of the memorial value of the gesture of written remembrance” as well as according prominence to “the place of women and minority discourse” (Gefen, 2017, pp. 66–67).

What contemporary writers ask literature to remedy, in the end, is “finitude” or finality, placing their hope in the “tomb” that can take shape in the text: “forme particulière de mémoire assurée par le papier qui vient concurrencer à la fois le musée et le cimetière” (Gefen, 2017, p. 237). Memories that assume a role in literature carry out crucial work, restoring genealogy and history to those who have been absent from national narratives, proposing to solidify their place far into the future: “Participant souvent, nous l'avons vu, à la construction généalogique du sujet et à sa lutte contre la souffrance et le deuil, la mémoire narrative vient offrir, proposer des modes de souvenir transgénérationnel” (Gefen, 2017, p. 237). This is what Guène is looking forward to when she publishes her mother's story: “Quand ma fille lira ce livre plus tard, j'ai envie qu'elle sache de quelle lignée elle est issue, qu'elle en soit fière” (Bouchenni, 2020). Part of the pride her offspring will feel when they look to this book down the line will be inseparable from the presence of the name inscribed within. The insertion of her father's name into this work, this inscription in a literary work in French, is the source of great emotion for the author: “Écrire leur nom sur un livre, cela dépasse l'aspect personnel pour moi. Je veux pouvoir leur rendre justice, lutter contre cet effacement qui a lieu, afin que leurs noms soient inscrits quelque part. Sinon leurs noms seront juste écrits sur leur tombe au bled” (Bouchenni, 2020). This is the greatest rectification of the written word, for Guène, the surest manner to repair the offence of oversight to which her elders have been subjected and assure that they are respected in another temporal mode, thanks to this recourse to the reparative.

In the analysis of Florian Cord, “the reparative mode” is “marked by an embrace of the affirmative — of positivity, constructiveness, optimism, even utopianism” (Cord, 2024, p. 5). The optimism of *La discrétion* is undeniable, particularly in the final chapter when Yamina accompanies her children and husband to the sea and enters the water for the very first swim of her life. The moment is so moving that she laughs and cries at once, and the matriarch is magically transported to a younger mindset, feeling as if she were a small child all over again. If this experience has moved her, eliciting emotions of immense depth and delightful contradiction, it has had perhaps an even greater impact on her kids: “*Tout à coup, par magie, Yamina a six ans, et ça bouleverse ses gamins*” (Guène 2021, p. 224). This moment of joy, of grace, of suspension in the water, this outing that allows for the admiration of the beauty of France also allows for this woman to at least make peace with her presence in this place: “On dirait que Yamina a enfin fait le deuil de ce retour impossible” (Guène 2021, p. 226).

The gestures that accumulate toward the end of the text are ever more generous, demonstrating that the members of this family are moving toward acceptance in many regards, of themselves and of others. Nothing is absolutely idyllic, of course, but these characters are engaging in various ways in the process of “working through” their trauma, and their past, in harmony with the understanding elaborated by Mireille Rosello: “What is reparative about some narratives is that they accept

giving up on repairing the past. The harm is done. We have to work through the trauma. But although working through the past is not going to systematically produce reparative effects, it does not follow that we therefore should stop working through the past” (Rosello, 2010, p. 24). There is value in the process, and in its progress, even if a final product is never guaranteed, for the “fulcrum” of “two different realities—pain and possibility, destruction and creativity—is repair” (Cord, 2024, p. 5). What stands out in the working through is that this is a “politics of affirmation,” with positive associations including “commitment, creativity, innovation, imagination, activeness and, indeed activism” (Cord, 2024, p. 5).

Dictation

Faïza Guène has lent her image and her energies to a program called “La dictée pour tous,” a collaborative endeavor which exists throughout France “with the mission of promoting literacy and equal opportunity for youth” (Snaije, 2020). The practice of dictation is emblematic of the French school system, wherein students learn to listen to a text read aloud by an authority figure and transcribe its every element perfectly, down to the slightest punctuation, on paper. They transform what is pronounced into written form, a gesture that is symbolically significant in the context of Faïza Guène’s sixth novel, which takes the oral account of the mother and transposes it into French literature. Such a movement changes the status of the spoken word and grants a form of immortality to the written, printed version which, as we have already noted, becomes an archive. The muse, the inspiration for Guène’s written work in this case is not an authority figure like the one to whom students must be subservient, but providing her a place in the publishing world grants to the mother a heretofore elusive authority, making up a gesture that gives voice to the woman from elsewhere whose story has been stifled for so long. If the act of taking dictation in the classroom makes students aware of the arbitrary nature of language and the unwavering grammatical rules to which they must be true in every written move they make, an awareness of these regulations is only a launching pad for Guène, who adopts innovative tactics in her literary inventions.

Her own mother loved school when she was young in Algeria, but circumstances prevented her from attending the instructional institution for long. When Faïza Guène, the celebrated author, brings visibility to the movement “La dictée pour tous” in France, she is advocating for educational opportunities for everyone—no matter their social status, regardless of their economic or ethnic background—and hoping to capitalize on the fact that young people from the underprivileged Parisian suburbs like the one she grew up in will recognize the value of taking notes in this fashion in order to gain greater familiarity with the French tongue. Perhaps, like she has, they will then aim to find the freedom to run with it, taking dictation from the world around them and sometimes making use of somewhat simple sentences to add layers to simplified views of what it means to be a woman of Algerian descent, as Faïza Guène has in this depiction of Yamina’s third daughter:

Trop indépendante pour certains. Pas assez pour les autres.

Elle soutient la liberté d'expression mais n'est pas *Charlie* pour autant. Elle est musulmane et féministe. Elle est française et algérienne. Elle n'a les cheveux ni lisses ni bouclés. Elle est *vegan* quand ce n'est pas *halal*. Elle est moderne et réactionnaire. Elle est tout et son contraire.

Imane vit dans un monde qui n'est pas prêt à accueillir sa complexité. (Guène 2021, p. 210)

It may be that some of those who come into contact with Faïza Guène when she draws attention to dictation will follow in her footsteps and embark on literary endeavors, finding forms of expression in the reparative mode and seeking inspiration in a variety of experiences that combine to compose characters filled with contradictory complexity. It could be that the experience of dictation serves as a springboard from which they take off to imagine layered textualities marked by intersections of individualities and collectivities that exceed bifurcated assignments, and that they create works that elide strict categorizations and opt instead to evoke striking simultaneities, waxing eloquent in poetic prose that exudes the tear-jerking joy of taking a plunge for the very first time, of conceptualizing forms of belonging that truly hit home, more than making up for the offence of oversight.

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