

The Elsewhere and the Overseas in Michaël Ferrier's *Mémoires d'outre-mer*

- 1 In the epilogue to an anthology of Borges' work, one of his translators offers the following reflection: "If, as Borges makes uncertainly clear to us, there are several Borgeeses, whose existences are in doubt always, what can be said of his translators? For Borges is translating us, as we translate him; and we are adding extra selves, linguistic ones, to the already confused extensions of this man who has been playing with our existence for so long"¹. To translate is thus to effect a shift; in moving from one language to another the text and all it contains undergoes a movement that in Borges' case intensifies the translators' sense of working with several selves whose existence is already precarious and which only multiply through the act of translation. Language is in this sense a kind of place, a context in which the work or the human subjects it refers to cannot retain its original integrity, even if that integrity was already in doubt and always provisional and shifting. Translation therefore shifts the work into an elsewhere, an *ailleurs* that does not resolve the contradictions and paradoxes in the original; rather, it tends to increase them, and bring them into plain sight. Such is the case with the 2015 novel by Michaël Ferrier, *Mémoires d'outre-mer*², whose very title presents the contested, paradoxical, contradictory, and in some senses untranslatable concept that the author seeks to question and to some degree reconceptualize.
- 2 How to translate this title? In the shift to the *ailleurs* of translation, the title poses some fundamental challenges that relate to literary tradition, the various meanings of *mémoires* and, most difficult of all, the notion of the *outre-mer*, that particularly French concept that is often translated as "overseas," a term that lacks the historical and political charge of the original and which in English is a rather neutral indicator of non-metropolitan territory. How to translate the loaded, contested, dismissive, even contemptuous connotation of the French term? Before dealing with the *outre-mer* issue, there is the question of translating *mémoires* and the lack—if it is a lack—in English of a single word for memory and memoir. There is also the issue of literary allusion, the title's reference to Chateaubriand's multi-volume memoir, which is translated as *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*. This allusion seems to necessitate the use of memoir rather than memory in the translated title, though no doubt the allusion would resonate far less strongly with an English-language readership. Then there is the play on *outre-tombe*, which does share with *outre-mer* the connotation of going beyond, of being a kind of *ailleurs*. The term *outre-mer* is the most difficult to translate, not least because it means different things in different places to different people, as Ferrier's novel shows. In the rest of this article, I will argue that the *outre-mer* functions in the novel as a form of the *ailleurs*, another time and place, an elsewhere from which the narrator seeks to redraw the literary and historical map of France, figuratively but also in literal ways. The greater part of the article will engage directly with the text and its ideas, but I first want to think quickly of the word *ailleurs* itself and the ways in which its etymology indicates some potentially useful ways of thinking about the elsewhere and the *outre-mer*.
- 3 Specifically, the term comes from *in alio loco* (in another place,) where *alio* is a comparative form of *alius* (other), which in turn is related etymologically to a broad set of terms that relate to otherness, and to othering, other places, but also other people, the *alienus*, the foreigner. There is also a direct etymological link to *alienare*, the sense of

transferring property from one to another, and of distancing, alienation in the more modern sense of estrangement and dispossession, also the psychological effects of this. It is one of the many attributes of Ferrier's novel that its exploration of the concept of the *outre-mer* indicates the ways in which it also figures the non-hexagonal space as an *ailleurs*, an elsewhere that entails othering, distancing, forgetting, and alienation, and that it resists all of these effects, seeking to inscribe into French history people, places, and events that it largely neglects, but which are, the novel suggests, vital to a full understanding of France and its place in the world.

- 4 It is significant that the first mention of the *outre-mer* in the text refers not to the space, but to the some of the people referred to by the term, family members and friends whom he names and calls “des aventuriers, des Outre-mer. Ils venaient de loin, de l'Inde, ou de l'Afrique, d'Europe, ou bien de Chine [...]. C'étaient des explorateurs, des romanesques” (16). These are not just other, inferior versions of French people; they are rather a dynamic group that through its very existence redefines the notions of fixed origins and identities that, the novel argues, continue to underpin official notions of Frenchness. They are “Descendants d'esclaves ou d'hommes libres, d'Africains pourchassés, d'Indiens engagés, de Chinois émigrés, d'Arabes exilés, de Juifs excommuniés, d'Européens expatriés, de Grecs déplacés, d'insulaires dispersés” (16). As descendants they have a history, shaped by the various adjectives attributed to each one, drawn from verbs that suggest movement, dispersal, and displacement into the *ailleurs*, the particular part of the *outre-mer* where they have come together: the island of Madagascar. This history has given them a certain knowledge, no doubt hard-won, and which is fundamental to the novel's conception of identity and belonging. Identity is not sameness as such, but forged through shared experience and the knowledge that comes from it, and which is expressed in their particular understanding of origins and their importance: “ils savaient depuis longtemps que l'origine n'est rien et n'a pas plus de valeur qu'une châtaigne enchâssée dans sa bogue ou qu'un manuscrit qui reste roulé dans son étui” (16). The literary metaphor is significant as it implies that writing itself may be restrained and limited through adherence to a conventional notion of origins as the generating root of literary expression. It is not that origins are unimportant—the various *Outre-mer* hold on to their memory, whether “sous forme de stigmaté ou sous forme de fruit” (16).
- 5 The concept of the elsewhere, and the related notion of the beyond is further explored through the narrator's primary reason for visiting Madagascar: the three tombs he visits at the beginning of the novel in the cemetery of Mahajanga, in two of which are housed his paternal grandfather Maxime Ferrier and his friend Ha Chou Dai Zong. The third tomb, the middle one, has no distinguishing marks, no date, no name, and yet, as the narrator says “c'est celle qui m'a conduit jusqu'ici” (17). The cemetery is a sort of *lieu de mémoire* for this corner—or center—of the *outre-mer*, in that it contains the remains not only of the grandfather but also of the soldiers of the colonial expedition by France in 1895, and of the British soldiers of the siege of Mahajanga in 1942. The former have a monument, while the latter do not, even if as the narrator says, the British stood up to the Vichy government on the island, where since the 19th century, “les idéologues anti-Sémites, rêvant d'étoiles jaunes sur l'île Rouge, y avaient songé pour servir de lieu de deportation aux Juifs d'Europe” (18).

- 6 The narrative enacts a kind of intellectual quest, in which familial, local, national, and international histories cross and inform each other, just as the histories of different places near and far intersect and influence each other, so that the idea of the *oultre-mer* is challenged and reworked, as is the idea of France as the center of the French-speaking universe, around which turn the territories of the *oultre-mer*. Indeed, it is as if the narrator spins the globe and relocates the center to the Indian Ocean, which is he says “le plus ancien espace marin constitué par les hommes en espace d’échanges, depuis plus de cinq mille ans (cinq cents ans pour l’océan Atlantique et deux mille ans pour le Pacifique)” (27). Since the beginning of time, he says, “les langues et les regards s’y croisent, les monnaies circulent, les ambitions s’affrontent” (27). The Indian Ocean is a site of exchange and migration, and the cultures of its islands and coastal territories as varied and profoundly mixed as any on earth. The narrator does not use the term, but this is a very sophisticated and longstanding site of creolization, of cultural and linguistic mixing that is not seen as an aberration, but as a natural and inevitable product of living on or by the ocean. The primary object of the quest is the narrator’s dead grandfather Maxime, who left his native island of Mauritius to join a traveling circus in Madagascar. A prodigious acrobat and independent spirit, Maxime fits in well with the circus troupe, which is itself a kind of traveling culture, itinerant, shifting, with a cast of diverse and colorful characters.
- 7 For all that the novel gives life to and shows the importance of the Indian Ocean *ailleurs*, the narrator’s quest also involves time in Paris, in his apartment on the rue du Fer-à-Moulin. Significantly, it is here that he reads about the Indian Ocean, and how a little-known literature in French has existed there since the 16th century: “récits de voyage, robinsonnades, utopies, fantasmes en tout genre, puis poésie exotique, romans coloniaux et enfin les littératures autochtones ou d’exil” (31-32). It is interesting that it is in Paris that he learns more about the Indian Ocean, and that conversely his time in Madagascar teaches him much about France and aspects of its history that are rarely spoken of in France. This is no doubt a sign of the dynamic of mutual exchange and revelation that the narrator sees as constitutive of cultural relations in the Indian Ocean, and which he extends to his own personal itinerary, the network of historical and cultural connections that the narrative gradually weaves together. “Ah, la France et sa mémoire,” he reflects, before insisting on the multiplicity of French memories, “leur tourmente, leurs turbulences” and remarking how difficult it is to talk in France about anything other than France, and even then it is a certain version of France. It is not easy to get people to admit, he says, “that France is not only the Hexagon” (32).
- 8 It is perhaps significant that in both places, the narrator is apparently drawn to cemeteries—the overgrown, verdant site of Maxime’s burial in Madagascar, and the rue des Morts in Paris, the former name of the street on which his apartment stands. Right beneath his window, he says, was the site of the old Clamart cemetery, the largest in Paris, but largely forgotten by everyone, despite its history of receiving the remains of those guillotined during the Revolution. “Il y a tout un peuple de morts là-dessous,” he writes, “C’est d’ici que je vous écris” (35). As he does in Madagascar, then, he situates himself among the dead in a sense, down in the histories forgotten by France but which he sees as vital to rethinking the nation’s idea of itself, the *oultre-mer*, and the related concepts of here and elsewhere. “Mais qu’est-ce que la France?” he asks, before adding, “Je persiste et je signe: pour le comprendre, il est nécessaire de passer par d’autres pays” (38).

- 9 This passage in and between countries involves encounters with some of the most stubborn and enduring notions of France and Frenchness. Playing on the term “Français de souche,” which is loaded with ideas of rootedness, fixity, and duration as markers of authentic French identity, he styles himself as “Français de branche,” a term which notably does not dismiss the desire or possibility of being French in a different way, one that depends less on fixed roots than with the less predictable shapes of branches or offshoots, forms that are future-oriented in that they are constantly growing without ever knowing how the final shape might be. “Les Français ne savent pas où me mettre,” he states, “On n’a pas idée d’être français comme ça, me disent-ils. Trop compliqué, tes mélanges!” (61). He finds an irony in this for, as he says, the French find unity only when under attack, and even then it does not last long. Otherwise, and contrary to those who state that his history and identity are too complicated, he finds only confusion and uncertainty when he arrives in France. “Quels troubles de mémoire! Dès qu’on touché à la France, tout devient trouble, compliqué, opaque” (62). He finds history and time to be made of opposing, superimposing layers, bits of memory that threaten to resurface, “remontant en tempête du fond des abîmes” (62). History is in this sense like the graveyards in close proximity to which he situates himself and his narration, a site of attempted burial and foreclosing that does not kill the memory of the dead, but which is a living force, seething with the energy of the undead, and over which he says, “on tente de poser le couvercle d’une grande mémoire unique, monocorde, monotone, prétendument nationale” (62).
- 10 It is no doubt significant that it is on the flight from Paris to Madagascar that he carries out one of his most extended critiques of closed, fixed notions of Frenchness, and the way that the idea of the nation is often confined to the Hexagon. While he is physically in between places the contradictions of settled, self-contained histories become the most apparent; the importance attached to the journey undercuts the idea of closed identity, that history cannot overspill national boundaries, that time can be contained and thought of in terms of movements through distinct, discrete phases. The flight and the aeroplane, recall the other journeys made by the grandfather and, before him, the unknown thousands who traversed the Indian Ocean and made it a site where cultures are inevitably scattered, dispersed, and reformed in ways that reflect the narrator’s preference for culture as offshoots and branches, rather than the fixed, rooted phenomena that persist in ideas of French national culture.
- 11 The critique is applied to the work *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*, the school book first published in 1877 and which seeks to educate young citizens about national history and culture, and above all, the unity of the nation. As the narrator says, it was the “manuel-phare de la III^e République,” and its influence persists to this day: “Finalement, près de cent cinquante ans plus tard, nous n’en sommes pas encore sortis” (63).
- 12 The book is a travel narrative of sorts, only the parameters of the voyage are fixed by the borders of France³. The journey is not only physical or geographical, but historical in nature, and the manual recounts the stories of Joan of Arc, ancient Gaul, Desaix, Bayard, and other moments taken to be constitutive of a unified, univocal French history (64). As the narrator notes, the France that is promoted, that is universally loved “est peuplée d’agriculteurs besogneux, d’ouvriers industriels, d’horlogers méticuleux... de militaires courageux... d’artistes prodigieux... de savants audacieux... d’écrivains fabuleux!” (65). While he admires the poetry of the work and its panoramic

evocation of France and its diverse landscapes, the narrator cautions that “cette histoire a ses zones d’ombre, et même ses points aveugles” (66). Notably, he critiques the way the book praises France for being the first nation to abolish slavery in its colonies in 1794, while neglecting to mention that Napoleon reintroduced it in 1802. He is also sensitive to the racial undercurrents in the book, expressed in the phrase “la race blanche, la plus parfaite des races humaines” (66). In short, the book is he says “la France, avec ses nuances improbables, ses paradoxes, ses contradictions” (66).

13 The most glaring absence in the book is he says that of the *outre-mer*, which even in later editions is referred to only in a few summary mentions. To be French, one has to live in France, and this is the idea inculcated into generations of French schoolchildren during the near hundred years of the book’s use in the nation’s schools. The narrator imagines an updated version of the textbook that would respond to the evolution in French culture and society, to immigration and technology, and present a different version of history, understood and told “par intervalles et par traversées, toute une série d’anfractuosités, de pas de côté” (68). The circular logic of the tour would be replaced by that of the detour, a less predictable journey into the forgotten parts of French history, the overseas departments, and all the other sites that have been touched by France, from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean (68-69). This is a new idea of the nation, “une France multi-territoriale, aux temporalités qui s’ignorent, se répondent, s’enlacent, se superposent” (69). The adoption of such an idea, which he realizes is far from possible even today would show that the history of France has always been various and multi-dimensional, inside and outside France, “en Europe comme aux Antilles, en Afrique ou dans l’océan Indien” (70). Again, it is significant that these reflections are triggered during a journey, the flight from Paris to Madagascar, the in-between time and place of travel where it seems notions of fixity and permanence are most tenuous, and where the connections between France and the *outre-mer* are most apparent.

14 The author’s account of his time in Madagascar may be read as a chapter of the revised *Tour de la France* that he calls for, and the place itself is described poetically and lyrically, much as the narrators of the textbook describe the Hexagon. Thus, his first sight of the capital city is expressed as a great surprise: “Voilà. Ça commence ici. C’est abrupt, très abrupt. Ça surgit. Un infini de cailloux et de crêtes. Antananarivo naît ici dans la fureur des montagnes. C’est un événement. [...] une ville qui monte et qui descend” (75). Already, however, he signals that his narrative will differ from the circular form of the tour, and will instead be more unpredictable, marked by abrupt beginnings and endings, quick turns, steep ascents and sharp falls, a style more fitted to the history of the place, and the immediacy of its physical appearance, which imposes itself on the narrator from the start. He is conscious that he is not the first non-native writer to visit the island to be struck in this way, and quotes Paulhan’s impression of the city as “une mer houleuse dont les vagues immenses se seraient brusquement figées pendant une tempête” (75). The narrator moreover describes the place in terms of literary or musical phrasing: “Un trajet aléatoire et ondoyant, fait de torsions de phrase et de changements de ton, modulations qui semblent s’adapter à chaque changement du relief et de la sensibilité, musique [...]. Aérienne et volubile, fragile et élancée, une improvisation permanente soutient cette topographie intempestive” (79). Later, he presents the place as a book and the people as characters in it: “Dans les pages de ce paysage, de cet almanach de roches et de feuillages, les Malgaches se promènent, en costumes, en haillons, en chapeaux” (83). He sees “joie” in the place, but it is a joy that

“dérange,” that is unsettling in its contradictory composition: the presence of insouciance in poverty, unexpected pleasures in penury, the exuberant architecture (79). He foresees a day when the city with its composite forms and its mixed population will be recognized as one of the most beautiful in the world, but for now he follows it he says like someone in love looks upon their lover, and enters into “cette science d’un nouveau genre” (81). The *ailleurs*, the *outre-mer* are thus experienced in terms of newness and surprise, and they have a disorientating effect on the narrator, whose very style is affected by the forms, shapes, sounds, and smells of the new place. He does not however seek to domesticate the difference and otherness he finds there; rather, he attempts to record it, preserve it, listen to it, feel it, and fall into its rhythms, through his writing and by the various journeys he undertakes during his time there. As he says, “Il faut se laisser porter par le pas du pays lui-même, par le pouls de la ville, sa pulsation ocre” (83).

- 15 While there is a clear sense of shock and surprise and even of being “dérangé” as he puts it by the newness of the place, he is also seeking the trace of his ancestor, Maxime, so that one feels that the narrator is searching for the ghostly presence of his grandfather, putting himself in the place of Maxime at times, imagining his reactions on arriving in the place, and no doubt picturing him as a predecessor, several steps ahead of him, always elusive, always escaping the net that the narrator to some degree wishes to catch him in, in order to nail him down, understand him, his motivations, his character and being. The grandfather is a sort of invisible companion to him as he makes his way across the city and the broader island, which makes the place at once unfamiliar and known or sensed through the familial connection. It is a place of memory, even if that memory is ghostly, elusive, and always out of reach.
- 16 The *ailleurs* here is not therefore a simple matter of place—even being in the island where Maxime spent the vast part of his life, there is still a sense of disorientation, of being out of step, and this is in effect a temporal sensation. Maxime lived in another place, but also in another time, and it is the dislocation of time that is the harder to negotiate for the narrator. The physical displacement is relatively easy to make, but it only serves to underscore how layers of time and history inevitably build and form an apparently impassible barrier to the longed-for object, the lost, mysterious grandfather. As such, the narrator recognizes the need to fall into time with the place, that the one constitutes the other. Evoking the local concept of the *mora mora*, he realizes that there is here “une autre façon de se mouvoir dans le temps, désinscrit de ses cadres et réfractaire à ses coordonnées” and that the outsider must “sortir du calendrier des hommes et de sa régulation asphyxiante, pour entrer dans l’énergie des corps, leur histoire secrète, leur liberté vibratoire” (83-84).
- 17 The narrator uses four essential, related means in his attempts to pierce the temporal barrier, find the rhythm of the place, and work his way through the overlapping, dense, multiple layers of time that have accumulated in the period since Maxime’s death: reading, writing, language, and music. The effects of time on memory are suggested right from the opening scene, where the three tombstones are under threat from the encroaching vegetation, which grows incessantly, covering over the human markers of time, the stones themselves, whose very inscriptions fade over time, and through the relentless effects of nature and climate. In such a fast-moving, multi-layered historical site, writing becomes all the more important, all the more urgent, as moments pass so quickly, sweeping with them time and memory, and the stories they contain. To write

here is to mark time, not so much to rescue it from forgetting, but to be faithful to its workings in this place where it apparently passes abruptly, unpredictably, violently, and irrevocably.

- 18 His primary written resource is contained in the bundles of papers kept by Georges, “un vieux créole indien,” whose father knew Maxime, attended the circus, and left on his death a selection of newspaper cuttings, posters, articles, and tickets that the narrator uses to reconstruct his idea of the circus and Maxime’s role in it (84). In addition, there are the notebooks of the circus owner, and a chest that belonged to the narrator’s grandmother, Pauline (85). Even these written documents, however, are not completely reliable. For example a circus program paints a vivid picture of a grand spectacle, but as Georges says to the narrator, “il y a fort à parier que ces programmes étaient en grande partie fictifs,” and that the circus was not as grand as it is depicted in the brochures (99). This is where the work of the novelist comes in, and the narrator evokes a colorful and vibrant company of artistes, dancers, acrobats, clowns, musicians, and animals that make it “The Largest Circus in the Indian Ocean” (104).
- 19 The stars of the circus are the three acrobats, and chief among them is Maxime. The circus owner’s notebooks describe him as a highly talented acrobat, and remarks on “l’extrême variation des vitesses, et la ponctuation quasi musicale des appuis sur le sol, comme en témoigne cette notation étonnante, semblable aux indications d’une partition: ‘Modéré, vite, fort, doux, gai’ ” (122). A single faded photograph of Maxime executing his signature triple twist strikes the narrator as he sees his grandfather standing in the dark, his arms open, his hands searching for the sky. The twist itself is interpreted as an act of liberation, of breaking out of time and space: “Là, il rompt le cercle de l’espèce, il s’extraît du cycle, il s’éclipse—et c’est comme si chaque roue lui faisait franchir un nombre infini de degrés de liberté. C’est un nouvel espace-temps, tissé par la lumière, gravé par la matière, un temps élastique et qui n’obéit plus” (127). The trapeze is thus a site of momentary liberty, of fleeting recreation of the acrobat’s relationship with time and space. It is as much a time as a place. Indeed, the specificities of place seem to fade away into the darkness, and he appears free from the earth, the land, and the associated notions of roots and belonging, which appear to him as traps, far more dangerous than the trapeze. The suspended ropes and wires of the trapeze are a kind of home for Maxime, who seems always to be trying to escape the land; after he retires from the circus he spends a lot of time at sea, diving and fishing. It is significant then that the trapeze is described as “un bateau: on entend le bruit du bois qui craque, les cordages tanguent, on sent le souffle du vent” (124).
- 20 More broadly, the acrobats are presented as symbols of the *outre-mer* itself, and their performances are related to the perilous, in-between status of the exile or the migrant. The tightrope walker in the middle of his wire is, the narrator says, “comme le nageur entre deux rives—un citoyen entre ses deux pays—à égale distance de l’une et de l’autre. Perdu outre-mer” (117). This is an opportunity for the narrator to remind the reader of the perils of belonging to the *outre-mer*, of being lost and disorientated, and falling into the abyss: “Ne croyez pas qu’il soit si facile d’être un enfant d’outre-mer. Les continents ne sont plus en vue, les repères s’éloignent... Alors il n’est rien d’autre qu’un feuillage fragile, traversé par les vents. [...] La désolation le guette, le marasme, l’apeurement” (117). In these ways, through reading, writing, language (and the few photographs he finds) the narrator pieces together a version of Maxime’s life that serves to penetrate the layers of time that separate but also connect the two, both children as he puts it, of the *outre-mer*.

- 21 The other, related means he invokes to penetrate the temporal layers that separate him from the past are music, and sound more generally. Through music, the narrator listens in to the past, and gains a fuller sense of how Maxime and his friends and family lived. Maxime's performance is evoked in musical terms, his movements described, as seen above, in musical notation (122). From the beginning of the novel, the narrator is alert to the musicality of the place, the people, and even the natural life. In the cemetery, standing by the silent gravestones, he hears the sounds of the small animals that live in the long grass and describes them as "tout un orchestre tapi de menus mouvements dans l'herbe," before referring to them in human terms as "le peuple des interstices, invisible et musical," and stating "il faut avoir l'oreille absolue pour l'entendre" (15). This indicates the importance he attributes to sounds as means of understanding and living in the present, but also of sensing the past, as in this case the sounds of animals and nature have an enduring quality in that Maxime would have heard the same sounds in his time in Madagascar. Sounds survive and persist in ways that images do not (photographs fade, papers turn yellow and slowly disintegrate, written words are not always reliable markers of the past) and indicate an underlying truth in the narrator's attempt to imagine his grandfather's life: that the ephemeral contains something of the eternal, indeed the only eternal elements he finds are the ephemeral, the sounds to which he attunes his narrative. By listening to even the most delicate, faint sounds, he can hear the deep rumble of history's greatest shifts; the more he looks at the graves, "des cercles de musique semblent monter et s'élargir autour du triolet de tombes" (15), and in these sounds, he says, "J'entends la rumeur du passage et des grandes migrations, l'énorme passade du courant, les voyages, les errances portées pas les bras de mer et les épaules du vent. J'écoute. C'est une partition de roche et de feuillages, de tissus indiens et de bonbons anglais, une musique d'une légèreté incroyable, voltige des papillons, forêts et voix superposées" (19). He further says that it takes only a few days on the island to begin to hear it, "c'est-à-dire pour le comprendre par l'oreille et les vibrations du pas sur le sol: Madagascar est un immense continent de sons et de chansons, un poème de timbres et de voix chuchote en cachette dans ses savanes et ses forêts, une réserve de musique pour le monde entier" (41).
- 22 Indeed, it is often through and in music and sound that Madagascar and its people make their mark on the world. The narrator cites the case of the musician Andriamanantena Razafinkarefo, who moves to the United States, is renamed by the American jazzmen as Andy Razaf, and proceeds to write some of the all-time classics of jazz: "In the Mood," "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Honeysuckle Rose," and "Black and Blue" (175). On the island itself, music is not just background sound, but a way of living for many, and again for the narrator, a means of tuning into the past of his grandparents, in particular his grandmother Pauline, who comes from an Indian family, from Goa, and before that perhaps from Bombay, or Portugal or Spain, another offshoot, another *outre-mer* (171). She is described in partly musical terms as one of those creoles "dont le métissage est si bien composé qu'on ne sait plus vraiment d'où elles viennent, elles oscillent là entre le chant multiple des veines et des ressources de leurs deux ou trois cultures" (171). She is known and recognized through sound. The narrator says "on l'entend venir de loin," and everyone knows her through her singing operas, poems, Malagasy songs or French romances (173). She plays most nights in her family orchestra with her mother, aunts, and uncles. They play jazz, beguine, tango, and rumba, and the great hits of the day by Louis Armstrong or Blanche Calloway (174). Again, the music is a marker of broader

shifts, the great migrations of the time, “ces musiques migrantes et métisses, ces mélodies, nées du murmure du monde lui-même” (175). The narrator imagines that it was perhaps on the terrace of the aunt’s hotel that Maxime and Pauline met, “au milieu des dièses, des croches, des doubles-croches, des soupirs et des noires pointées” (174). As times change, music marks out these changes, too: when the Vichy régime imposes a ban on music on 14th July 1940, and promotes a sanitized form of folklorized music, the narrator notes “ça ne swingue plus” at the family hotel (264).

23 But music persists and resists, just as the people do, to their final days. As Pauline lies dying, she wishes to play once more on the piano, but is too weak, and gathers her strength to sing again, “d’une voix douce et distincte, une chanson de louve, étrange mélopée sans paroles” (311). As Maxime looks over her, he sings for her, all the songs she would have sung before, and mixes them with his prayers and poems (313). As the narrator suggests, the people live and die through music, their story lies in music and sounds, which was their way of sharing their love, their fear, their joy and suffering. The sensation the novel leaves with the reader resides mostly in the ear; it is a work to be heard, and history to listen to, a place to tune into.

24 It is perhaps significant, then, that when the epilogue relocates the narrator to France the narrative switches to the written record of an interview with a French journalist, who seems perplexed by the narrator’s multiple roots, and seeks to classify him, and attach a knowable identity to him. After citing the various branches of the narrator’s family, he asks pointedly, “Et tout ça fait quoi?” (332). The narrator replies in the only way he can, given the importance he attaches to sound and music. “Vous connaissez la chanson,” he says and to the journalist’s puzzled reply, responds “D’excellents Français” (332).

25 Ultimately, the journalist’s perhaps willful inability to understand the narrator’s complex family and cultural background indicates a broader, persistent tendency to push the *outre-mer* to the margins of France, the borders of Frenchness. As such, the *outre-mer* remains peculiarly untranslatable, an elsewhere, an *ailleurs*, and perhaps also a *d’ailleurs*, a moreover, a besides, an afterthought and an adjunct to France, still not accepted, as Ferrier’s work persuasively and elegantly argues, as it should be, as an integral, vital, sonorous part of France’s transnational history.

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NOTES

- ¹ Alistair Reid, “Editor’s Epilogue”, in Jorge Luis Borges, *A Personal Anthology*, New York, Grove Press, 1967 [1961], p. 206.
- ² Michaël Ferrier, *Mémoires d’outre-mer*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015.
- ³ With the omission or amputation of Alsace-Lorraine. See Jacques Ozouf and Mona Ozouf, “Le Tour de France par deux enfants: le petit livre rouge de la République”, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de la mémoire, La République*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 291-322.