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Enrica Aurora Cominetti – University of Guelph

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# **In Between Wor(l)ds: Feminist Autofiction and Post/Colonial Identity in Marie Cardinal's *Au pays de mes racines* and Marguerite Duras's *L'amant***

Enrica Aurora COMINETTI

University of Guelph

## **Introduction**

By making use of autobiographical elements, autofictional works can be regarded as aligning with Second Wave feminism's principle that the "Personal is Political," in that they emphasize the fact that women's "personal" issues have great political relevance (Thompson 346). Autofictional works such as Marie Cardinal's *Au pays de mes racines* (1980) and Marguerite Duras's *L'amant* (1984) expose and voice women's post/colonial<sup>1</sup> and complex experiences in Algeria and Indochina under and/or after French colonial rule, thus functioning as an empowering tool of representation. These two novels, although focusing on different cultural contexts, are similar in portraying how the mark of in-betweenness and the related power dynamics make their protagonists "nomadic," fragmented, fundamentally different and torn between opposite cultures. Their characters appear as post/colonial products and agents located in between two *words* and *worlds*: the colony and the metropole.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how the literary genre of autofiction can function as a feminist tool of representation germane to exposing concerns regarding the concept of in-

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<sup>1</sup> The term "post/colonial," a neologism Chris Bongie first employed in *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (1998), indicates a relationality "in which two words and worlds appear uneasily as one, joined together and yet also divided in a relation of (dis)continuity" (Bongie 12-13). This term synthesizes the fragmented identity of the narrators of the novels considered here, who embody a cultural tension between the different poles of attraction around which they orbit (namely, the colony and the metropole).

betweenness and the relative processes of cultural hybridization in post/colonial contexts. The analysis, based on Rosi Braidotti's nomadic political project of sexual difference as well as on Michel Foucault's practice of "subjectivation," focuses on questions of the formation and representation of women's subjectivity in Cardinal's *Au pays de mes racines* and Duras's *L'amant*, particularly with reference to the dichotomous status of their post/colonial and transcultural subjects. The aim is to show that these autofictional accounts, compared across different cultural contexts, can be considered as tapping into contemporary cultural and feminist theories prompting a redefinition of the notion of the subject as multilayered, culture-specific and mediated by sociohistorical factors.

### **In Between Genres: Autofiction**

The term "autofiction" first appeared on the back cover of Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* in 1977 and has been heavily contested ever since as it challenges dominant configurations of knowledge adopted in more traditional forms of autobiography (Rérolle). This literary category indicates a genre in which, notwithstanding nominal identity or a correspondence of personal and sociocultural references between author, narrator and protagonist, the latter two differ from the former in their being fictionalized (Doubrovsky 256; Gasparini 24-25). For this reason, autofiction has been considered to encompass different genres of writing, raising questions about its significance and legitimacy. Indeed, over the last forty years, the genre of autofiction has been the center of heated discussions especially among French literary critics. On the one hand, the specialist in autobiography Philippe Lejeune posits in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975) that referentiality and literariness are mutually exclusive, and that the former, ensured by the nominal identity between author, narrator and protagonist, can only be used in relation to autobiography

and not to autofiction (23). On the other hand, Serge Doubrovsky shows in his novel *Fils* that the referential traits present in autofictional works do not invalidate their literariness, as they combine the real events underlying them with fictional language (Cusset 1).

Other critics and theorists have opened up the Doubrovskian definition of autofiction. Vincent Colonna posits in *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires* (2004) that autofictional novels can dispense with nominal identity and are rather focused on a writer's fictionalization of his/her own persona (196). Going a step further, in his monograph *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (2004), the essayist Philippe Gasparini stresses the fact that the referential nature of an autofictional book is constructed through personal and sociocultural references, and not merely through nominal identity between author, narrator and protagonist (24-25). Moreover, in her article "L'Autofiction, un genre pas sérieux," Marie Darrieussecq argues that autofiction belongs to the literary canon since, in requiring a double pact between author and reader – a factual and a fictional one – it defies Gérard Genette's theory according to which the literary status can be attributed to fiction by virtue of its nature, and to factual accounts only as far as their aesthetic is concerned (Jeannelle et al. 22-23).

The autofictional narrative form articulates its subject as different from the autobiographical omniscient narrator, as characterized by a certain degree of nonlinearity, a fragmented identity and a preoccupation with memory (Contat 119; Cusset 2-3; Jones 176-177). Indeed, the autofictional subject has often been referred to as a "post-Freudian" one since its "unstable, prospective rather than retrospective" narrative aligns with the unsettledness of the post-Freudian "I" as well as with its focus on stories revolving around events rather than authenticity (Jordan 76). Because of this and of its relatively marginal status within the literary field, such a hybrid narrative form in between fact and fiction has often been dismissed as being typically

feminine, inferior to other allegedly more masculine and linear ways of writing (Jordan 77; Rérolle). However, in taking issue with autobiographical norms, autofiction lends itself to experimentation with new modes of expression of women's experiences. Therefore, the autofictional pluralized "I" can be believed not only to challenge overarching representational techniques, but also to be seen as a tool which enables the author to articulate the multiplicity of the fragmented identity of the female subject, thus tapping into feminist theories challenging patriarchal categorizations and putting forward alternative approaches to the portrayal of women's subjectivity. Indeed, the hybrid nature of autofiction, a literary genre in between fact and fiction, makes it particularly suitable to voice concerns about the transcultural status of female colonizers in post/colonial countries – women who are torn between being faithful to the metropole, and their love for the colony in which they grew up. Such an as yet unexplored correlation between form and content is evident in the novels *Au pays de mes racines* and *L'amant*.

### **Liminal Narratives: *Au pays de mes racines* and *L'amant***

Although both Cardinal and Duras never specifically categorized *Au pays de mes racines* and *L'amant* as autofictional, these works can be considered as such based on their stylistic choices. Indeed, *L'amant* has already been analysed by critics as autofiction, as it recounts autobiographical anecdotes in a way that appears "festonné et brodé,"<sup>2</sup> and where the autobiographical "je"<sup>3</sup> is portrayed as multiple and characterized by "diverses variations déclamatoires"<sup>4</sup> (Burgelin 9; Diouf 218). The value of Duras's adoption of the hybrid autofictional genre has been defined by Najet Limam-Tnani as a tool functional to the articulation of the two cultures the author/narrator

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<sup>2</sup> "Festooned and embroidered." All translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> "I."

<sup>4</sup> "Different declamatory variations."

negotiate (47). The analysis carried out in this paper adds to this theorization by presenting the use of the autofictional genre not just as a reflection of cultural hybridity, but also as a literary device enabling the portrayal of female nomadic subjectivities. *Au pays de mes racines*, on the other hand, has been read mainly as an autobiographical work, even if in an interview to *France 3*, Cardinal admits that her literary works mingle fact with fiction; as she states: “C’est difficile d’expliquer ce qui est vrai, ce qui est faux . . . ils sont peu autobiographiques mes livres . . . je brode. . .”<sup>5</sup> (Duffy 293; Persson 153; Poncet). It can therefore be argued that both *Au pays de mes racines* and *L’amant* are autofictional since, in their presenting of an adult’s recollection of a child’s memories of different post/colonial contexts, they are characterized by an extremely fragmented structure in which autobiographical anecdotes from the writers’ childhood and from other times alternate with each other in a nonlinear way. Furthermore, the lack of linearity and disjointed organization of the texts mimic not only the act of recovering past memories, but also the fragmented nature of the autofictional narrating selves, which are portrayed as female subjects split between two cultures. The ways in which both authors play with the autofictional mode differ, yet they both reflect and intertwine with their post/colonial contexts.

Published in 1980, *Au pays de mes racines* is written in the form of a diary which describes Marie Cardinal’s return journey to Algeria, the country where she was born and brought up, after being away for twenty-four years. In the text the author mingles fiction with her personal impressions of the new Algerian political situation and her memories of its colonial past. Cardinal fled the colony for the metropole in 1956, during the period in which Algeria violently fought against France for independence (1954–1962). The outbreak of the conflict occurred because of a combination of different factors: France’s overt aversion to Islam, its exploitation of the colony’s

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<sup>5</sup> “It’s hard to explain what’s true, what’s false . . . my books aren’t autobiographical . . . I embroider. . .”

economic and cultural resources as well as the resulting lack of financial, literacy and political opportunities for Algeria's Muslim population (Zack 64; Cooke 61). In July 1962 – more than a century since the beginning of the French colonial rule – Algeria finally became an independent country at the cost of the lives of 17,500 French soldiers and between 200,000 and one million Muslim Algerians (Paul et al. 89).

In *Au pays de mes racines*, the narrator presents her colonial memories in a nonlinear way, through a series of “illustrations juxtaposées”<sup>6</sup> where “le passé et le présent se mêlent”<sup>7</sup> (Cardinal 166, 181). This autofictional narrative style mirrors the tumultuousness of Algeria – her putative “mère”<sup>8</sup> (54) –, portrayed as characterized by a history “pleine de chevauchées, de razzias,”<sup>9</sup> which “se raconte”<sup>10</sup> in a fictionalized way (Cardinal 122, 128; Marrone 125). Moreover, the language adopted can be considered to reflect the post/colonial relationality between the narrator and the colony/metropole. Although the protagonist declares to have known “l’harmonie”<sup>11</sup> only when in Algeria and therefore to strongly identify with Algerian culture, the novel is written in French – the language of the colonizer (Cardinal 6). According to Laurie Corbin, in writing her journal in the language of the oppressor, Cardinal shows “that the oppressed can both identify with and reject cultures that oppress them, lacking a language that might permit them to speak their sense of themselves without struggle” (142). The Algerian author Assia Djébar adds that “l’autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme une fiction,”<sup>12</sup> thus corroborating the fact that *Au pays de mes racines*, in recounting autobiographical anecdotes through the language of a culture depicted as domineering, can indeed be read as an autofictional work (qtd. in Marrone 122).

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<sup>6</sup> “Juxtaposed illustrations.”

<sup>7</sup> “Past and present overlap.”

<sup>8</sup> “Mother.”

<sup>9</sup> “Full of rides and raids.”

<sup>10</sup> “Is told.”

<sup>11</sup> “Harmony.”

<sup>12</sup> “Autobiography which is written in the opposing language is woven like a fiction.”

In 1984, Marguerite Duras published *L'amant*, a memoir in which she recounts her adolescence in Saigon, French Indochina, during the 1920s, and her affair with a wealthy Chinese man in a fictionalized way. French colonialism in Vietnam lasted more than six decades, from 1883 until 1954 (Rydstrom 191). As Saigon was the most populous and economically flourishing city of Vietnam, it was also the one most affected by French imperialistic measures, such as the imposition of a modern and controlling state centralization of the natives and a rigid categorization of indigenous people based on cultural and ethnic diversity (Peycam 503). For this reason, Vietnam's societies were very stratified under the French colonial rule.

In *L'amant*, Duras engages with autofictional strategies in various ways. Firstly, the fact that the story is mainly written in the present tense, regardless of the time frame being referred to, aligns with the prospective nature of the autofictional genre (Jordan 76). Additionally, the narrative revolves around a series of photographs (such as the opening image of the young Duras crossing the Mekong river on a ferry), which, in their being presented in a nonlinear, circular way, appear as vivid fragments of the memory of an autofictional subject (Helmi Kalini 716; Morgan 272). The language adopted, too, mimics this lack of linearity – which is typical of autofictional works –, since it is characterised by the use of ellipses as a literary technique reflecting the gaps riddling the narrative. Such an elusive style represents an aesthetic choice Duras makes to stress how the self, in its being fragmented, composite and multilayered, cannot be fully rendered through words and images, but it can only be evoked through the adoption of fictional elements as well as the manipulation of silence (Morgan 278). Indeed, she recognizes the impossibility of faithfully reproducing her personal story when she states: “L’histoire de ma vie n’existe pas”<sup>13</sup> (Duras, *L'amant* 14). Therefore, she resorts to autofictional techniques such as the adoption of the

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<sup>13</sup> “The story of my life does not exist.”



systematic shift from first-person to third-person narrator, which distances the author from the narrator and the protagonist. In particular, Duras replaces the predominant autobiographical “je” with fictional epithets such as “elle”, “la petite,” “l’enfant,”<sup>14</sup> in the scenes with the Chinese man, which are the most intimate ones. This duality due to a fictional intrusion transposes the post/colonial tension imbuing the content of the novel on a stylistic level.

### **In-betweenness as a Mode of Inquiry and Narration**

#### ***The Nomadic Narrative Subject or the Feminist Autofictional Subject***

In establishing a link between Rosi Braidotti’s feminist nomadic project of sexual difference and the main characteristics of the autofictional narrative subjects portrayed in *Au pays de mes racines* and *L’amant*, this section of the article intends to shed light on the points of contact between autofiction and feminist issues, particularly as pertains to the notion of in-betweenness marking the different post/colonial contexts in which the two novels are set.

In her book *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), Braidotti states that within the phallogocentric scientific, religious and legal domains, women have traditionally been relegated to the role of “Other,” as opposed to the figure of “Self,” which has for centuries been symbolized by the white, middle-class, heterosexual man (98, 152). In order to rework the notion of difference or “otherness” in terms of positivity and empowerment, Braidotti created a nomadic political project of sexual difference, whose scheme consists of three levels which all deal with the theme of sexual difference from various standpoints.

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<sup>14</sup> “She,” “the little one,” “the child.”

The first phase is called “Difference Between Men and Women” and is aimed at untethering the concept of difference from its century-old link with inferiority, thus promoting women’s experience as different from the pseudo-universalistic male “Self” (Braidotti 159). In interpreting Duras’s statement that “women who can get beyond the feeling of having to correct history will save a lot of time,” Braidotti suggests a model of investigation of female subjectivity which does not comply with the masculinist paradigm of the “Self,” but which, on the contrary, strives for the construction of “an alternative female subject” (Braidotti 148, 161; Duras, “Marguerite Duras” 74).

The second level of the project of sexual difference, called “Differences Among Women,” is meant to go beyond the dichotomy “Self”/“Other,” male/female subject, so as to address the specificity of women’s embodied experiences. The author calls for the need to distinguish between the “Woman” as “the culturally dominant and prescriptive model for female subjectivity” and its real-life epitomizations (Braidotti 164). In this way, she opens up the notion of difference to variables such as age, class, race, sexual preferences, therefore stressing the importance of women’s cultural situatedness as opposed to their generic portrayals (Braidotti 163).

The third and last level of sexual difference as a nomadic political project, named “Differences Within Each Woman,” focuses on women’s identity from a microscopic point of view. To be more specific, this stage of the scheme tackles the multiplicity of the female subject by describing it as multilayered, material, “slit, fractured,” “relational,” “made of successive identifications” (Braidotti 165). Such attributes are all related to the fact that every woman’s subjectivity is compound in its being engendered by the recollection of memories – hence “made of successive identifications” – and the establishment of a relation to the “other” – hence

“relational.” This causes “each real-life woman” to be bound to continuously identify herself with fragmented images springing from such processes (Braidotti 165-166).

The potential Braidotti’s feminist nomadic project holds for the analysis of the autofictional narrating subjects presented in *Au pays de mes racines* and *L’amant* is clear. Firstly, in both works the narration is carried out by female narrators who also embody the protagonists of these autofictional stories. By mingling autobiographical elements with fictional strategies, Cardinal’s and Duras’s texts bring women’s subjectivity to the fore, thus representing different “alternative female subjects” and dispensing with the masculinist paradigm of the pseudo-universalistic “Self” (Braidotti 161). For example, in *Au pays de mes racines*, the narrator admits interweaving fact and fiction when mentioning that, while writing her personal story, she grows estranged from it, as if it were fictitious: “. . . cet ensemble de jouissances et d’angoisses transcrites apparaît subitement comme un roman, . . . le manuscript me devient étranger.”<sup>15</sup> (Cardinal 155). Similarly, *L’amant*’s narrating subject appears so alienated from “[l]’histoire de [sa] vie”<sup>16</sup> that she affirms: “Ça n’existe pas,”<sup>17</sup> thus confirming the necessity of employing fictional elements to reconstruct it (Duras, *L’amant* 14).

A criticism could be made here about the use of fiction in Cardinal’s and Duras’s autofictional novels: their adoption of fictional elements could be seen as invalidating the representation of their authentic experiences, for said literary devices may allegedly prevent them from faithfully depicting their autobiographical portrayals. This stance can be traced back to Genette’s rather reductive definition of autofiction as a special form of fictional narration, which obliterates the autobiographical value of this genre (Genette 87). As a counterargument to this, it

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<sup>15</sup> “This set of transcribed pleasures and anxieties suddenly looks like a novel, . . . the manuscript becomes foreign to me.”

<sup>16</sup> “[The] story of [her] life.”

<sup>17</sup> “It does not exist.”

is worth taking into account Ivan Jablonka's concept of "method fictions," presented in his essay *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine: Manifeste pour les sciences sociales* (2014), which sheds new light on the value of autofictional accounts. Since "method fictions" are defined as aiming at investigating and interpreting reality, autofictional works can be considered as such in their mingling of fact and fiction, thus constructing a different type of reality which is meant to effectively represent and reflect on concrete issues (qtd. in Moulin 609). This is particularly true considering how both autobiographical and fictional elements appear as essential to the reconstruction of the autofictional subject's fragmented memories.

Secondly, Cardinal and Duras, by mainly adopting a first-person narrator throughout their narratives, expose (while fictionalizing) their personal and autobiographical lived experiences. In calling attention to the specificity of their nomadic stories, caught between different worlds and cultures, they depict the embodied standpoints of two real-life women and epitomize the heterogeneity of the "Other," as opposed to the global and abstract notion of "Woman." Indeed, their narratives hinge on the protagonists' transcultural predicament, for they appear to be torn between the culture of the metropole and that of the colony, and to have contrasting feelings about both. As the characters belong to colonialist families settled in a colony, they feel split between the social norms imposed on them by their colonial status and the love for the country where they grew up and for the people living there. This is clearly expressed by Cardinal when she shows her protagonist's inner struggle due to feeling, at the same time, French and Arab. At the beginning of *Au pays de mes racines*, the narrator declares that the reason for her trip back to Algeria lies in her desire to come to terms with her intrinsic difference, her being a "personne bicéphale"<sup>18</sup> marked by "l'alliance ou la guerre de deux cultures"<sup>19</sup> (Cardinal 17). The use of contrasting terms such as

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<sup>18</sup> "Two-headed person."

<sup>19</sup> "The alliance or the war of two cultures."

“alliance” and “guerre” symbolizes not only her split identity, but also her post/colonial and ambiguous feelings towards the colony and the metropole. The motif of this in-between, fractured self recurs throughout her story, for example when she questions later on: “La coupure avec moi-même a commencé tôt: Arabe-Française, Française-Arabe?”<sup>20</sup> (Cardinal 50). Quite differently from Cardinal’s main character, Duras’s narrator never explicitly refers to her feeling of being in between two cultures – French and Annamite –, yet her transcultural status can be clearly observed when she distances herself from other white French women in Saigon who “se gardent pour l’Europe”<sup>21</sup> and “s’habillent pour rien”<sup>22</sup> by dressing in a way which can be seen as unconventional for her young age and by starting a relationship with a Chinese man (Duras, *L’amant* 27). When meeting the Chinese lover on the ferry crossing the Mekong for the first time, she is wearing her mother’s silk dress with one of her brothers’ leather belts, gold lamé high heels and a man’s brownish-pink fedora, which makes her appear ambiguous and different from anyone else in the colony, as “aucune jeune fille ne porte de feutre d’homme dans cette colonie à cette époque-là”<sup>23</sup> (Duras, *L’amant* 18-20). Moreover, “la jeune fille”<sup>24</sup> is portrayed as characterized by an essential difference not only with regards to her behaviour and attitude towards patriarchal norms in the colony, but also concerning the perception she has of herself, as she declares: “Soudain je me vois comme une autre”<sup>25</sup> (Duras, *L’amant* 42, 20).

Thirdly and lastly, the autofictional subject is by definition composite, characterized by a fragmented memory and identity (Cusset 2-3). Such a preoccupation with the process of recollection and the multiplicity of subjectivity is shared by Braidotti’s female feminist subject,

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<sup>20</sup> “The fracture within myself started early: Arab-French or French-Arab?”

<sup>21</sup> “Keep themselves for Europe.”

<sup>22</sup> “Dress up for nothing.”

<sup>23</sup> “No girl used to wear a man’s hat in the colony at that time.”

<sup>24</sup> “The girl.”

<sup>25</sup> “Suddenly I see myself as other.”

which, as stated above, is described as split and in a constant state of becoming due to the reconstruction of past memories. By looking at the female narrators of *Au pays de mes racines* and *L'amant*, a convergence of such characteristics can be observed, as the subjectivities depicted there are presented as fragmented, located in a liminal space, and having a fractured memory. As illustrated above, both characters are described as having multilayered identities and being in between different cultures. Moreover, they both question the authenticity of their memories: "J'oublie tout," "Peut-être que je me trompe,"<sup>26</sup> Duras's narrator states; "[L]a mémoire, elle, me dépasse,"<sup>27</sup> Cardinal's protagonist admits (Duras, *L'amant* 78, 93; Cardinal 90).

Relating the three levels of Braidotti's working scheme of the project of feminist nomadism to the principal attributes of the narrative subjects of the novels considered here, it can be argued that these autofictional narrators can be assimilated to said model of female feminist subjectivity. As a consequence, Cardinal's and Duras's protagonists can be defined as "Braidottianly" feminist and "nomadic" in their rendering of women's experience not only as specifically female and different from the masculinist "Self," but also in their uncovering of a whole array of culture-specific relations and elements which are inevitably interconnected and affected. Through their nonlinear overlapping of fragmented memories and images from the past, Cardinal and Duras put forward an alternative way of representing the female feminist subject, which, according to Braidotti, cannot be fully comprehended nor portrayed within the phallogocentric system of knowledge.

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<sup>26</sup> "I forget everything," "Maybe I am wrong."

<sup>27</sup> "[M]emory is beyond me."

### *Nomadic “Subjectivized” Subjects In Between Wor(l)ds*

The mark of in-betweenness which characterizes the feminist autofictional subjects of *Au pays de mes racines* and *L’amant* can be ascribed not only to the above-mentioned “Braidottianly” nomadic nature of the protagonists, but also to the power dynamics contributing to the formation of their cross-cultural identities. So as to better analyze said forces, the focus will now be shifted to Michel Foucault’s notions of power and of the practice of “subjectivation.” Indeed, as argued by Miri Rozmarin, Foucault’s theories of power can be seen as partaking in Braidotti’s project of sexual difference, as they focus on the extent to which power dynamics influence the shaping of one’s specific subjectivity and can therefore be deemed responsible for making it constitutively different (6-7).

In the afterword to *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1983), Foucault indicates the phenomenon of “subjectivation” as one of the practices through which individuals become subjects (“The Subject and Power” 208). He considers power relations in terms of an “antagonism of strategies” or “struggles,” which challenge the significance of individualization by stressing one’s specific subjectivity while, at the same time, stifling that very same subjectivity (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 211). Thus, according to Foucault, power cannot be conceived of merely in terms of repression, but must be understood as a productive force causing a reaction in the individual who is subject to it. This notion of power as a creative force leads him to deduce that subjectivation, “the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject,” depends on relations of power which give shape to human beings’ subjectivity (Foucault, “The Return of Morality” 253). The individualizing aspect of power is embodied by institutions such as family, educational organizations and medical systems, and exercised through the relations established between subjects (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 215, 217). In this way, the

“subjectivized” subject is presented not only as an entity which is engendered, shaped and constricted by power dynamics, but also as an agent capable of producing its own influence structures. This means that, in order to break free from the individualizing and totalizing dominance impinging on individuals, one needs to develop alternative subjectivities exploring different individualities (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 216). In defining power as a productive force exerted on and by acting agents, Foucault prompts a reinterpretation of “subjectivized” subjects as capable of autonomy and resistance.

A link can now be established between Foucault’s discourse on “subjectivation” and the way in which the autofictional narrators of *Au pays de mes racines* and *L’amant* articulate their nomadic subjectivities. These narrative subjects, in presenting themselves as female individuals characterized by an intrinsic difference, relate their stories of in-betweenness through the disclosure of the power dynamics molding and influencing – “subjectivizing” – the formation of their identities. As products and vehicles of power, such “subjectivized” narrators, albeit created yet not determined by social structures, present themselves as “agents,” “active determinants” of their own alternative female individualities (Rozmarin 7). The role played by family interferences is very strong in the two books, for they embody the colonist force of attraction partaking in the “subjectivation” process of the female narrators. Indeed, as argued by Foucault, the family institution represents one of the vehicles through which productive state power can be exerted (“The Subject and Power” 215). To be more specific, both narrating subjects have a contradictory relationship not just with their families, but with their maternal figures in particular. In *Au pays de mes racines*, the narrator appears to be forged by the inner struggle related to having to choose between “eux,”<sup>28</sup> the Algerian people, and “nous,”<sup>29</sup> her family of French settlers (Cardinal 31,

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<sup>28</sup> “Them.”

<sup>29</sup> “Us.”



151). Her role of mediator between two cultures is further complicated by the tormented relationship with her mother, which she explicitly exposes towards the end of the novel, when she recalls the moment her mother told her about her efforts to abort while she was pregnant with her (Cardinal 179-180). This episode prompted her to reconsider her relationship with her parent, as she reveals that, from that moment onward, Algeria became indeed like a maternal figure to her: “Je me suis accrochée à ce que j’ai pu, à la ville, au ciel, à la mer . . . , ils sont devenus ma mère”<sup>30</sup> (Cardinal 181; Haigh 66). It could therefore be argued that, even though her familiar nucleus represents the colonist “subjectivizing” force impinging on her, in choosing to adopt Algeria as her “famille,”<sup>31</sup> the protagonist proves she is able to resist said power dynamics and be an active determinant of her own composite identity (Cardinal 41).

Although in *L’amant* the narrator never explicitly refers to French Indochina as her “famille” like Cardinal’s does in *Au pays de mes racines*, her bond with the colony can be noticed in some of the passages in the novel where she emotionally describes the Mekong river and the Vinhlong province as “beaux,” “incroyables,” “au-delà de toute laideur”<sup>32</sup> (Duras, *L’amant* 17, 116). Moreover, like in *Au pays de mes racines*, the dichotomous nature of *L’amant*’s female subject is further complicated by the maternal figure with whom she has a very troubled relationship, which was crucial to the development of her identity as she confesses: “Elle est le lieu au seuil de quoi le silence commence. . . . Je suis encore là . . . à la même distance du mystère. . . . Je n’ai jamais rien fait qu’attendre devant la porte fermée”<sup>33</sup> (Duras, *L’amant* 34-35). Indeed, because of the economic difficulties her family experienced after the death of her father, they were

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<sup>30</sup> “I clung to what I could, to the city, to the sky, to the sea . . . , they became my mother.”

<sup>31</sup> “Family.”

<sup>32</sup> “Beautiful,” “incredible,” “beyond ugliness.”

<sup>33</sup> “She is the place on the threshold of which silence begins. . . . I am still there . . . at the same distance from mystery. . . . I have never done anything but wait before the closed door.”

marginalized from colonial society and felt closer, both economically and socially, to indigenous people. The narrator reports that they were disdainfully considered by the other settlers in the colony as “[une] famille de voyous blancs”<sup>34</sup> (Duras, *L’amant* 109). In spite of their desperate condition, her mother constantly tried to recover their bourgeois status and to reintegrate them within the French colonist community. *L’amant*’s protagonist’s relationship with her family can thus be seen as the main “subjectivizing” force responsible for her in-between status, as, on the one hand, it pushes her away from the other French settlers and towards the Annamite people, while, on the other hand, her mother manifests a preoccupation with racial purity and superiority. In resisting these “subjectivizing” dynamics and choosing to forge her multilayered subjectivity, the female narrator gets closer to the man from “la Chine du Nord,”<sup>35</sup> not only to escape economic hardship – right after meeting him, she declares: “Dorénavant, j’aurai une limousine pour aller au lycée”<sup>36</sup> – but also to distance herself from her family, as she says: “[J]e serai toujours là à regretter . . . tout ce que je laisse, . . . la famille de Sadec”<sup>37</sup> (Duras, *L’amant* 44-45).

## Conclusion

Cardinal’s *Au pays de mes racines* and Duras’s *L’amant* can be read in light of Braidotti’s model of feminist nomadic subjectivity as their autofictional narrative subjects, appearing fragmented, multilayered and reconstructed through the recollection of personal memories, bring specific and complex women’s experiences to the fore. The autofictional mode through which the narrating subjects of these narratives voice their culturally located experiences allows them not only to report and confront the individuality imposed on them, but also to performatively assert an alternative

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<sup>34</sup> “[A] family of white thugs.”

<sup>35</sup> “North China.”

<sup>36</sup> “From now on, I will have a limousine to go to school.”

<sup>37</sup> “[I] will always regret . . . everything I leave, . . . the family of Sadec.”

way in which to portray and articulate their pluralized identities. Their subjectivities appear to be “subjectivized,” hence constituted, by power relations pertaining to the post/colonial circumstances in which they find themselves. In both cases, such forces are presented as being spawned by their colonist families and by their maternal figures in particular. These “subjectivizing” dynamics can be seen as responsible for the fragmentation of the protagonists’ autofictional identities and, thus, for their in-betweenness, essential difference and post/colonial tension towards the colonists and the indigenous people. Yet, although they are produced as subjects in discourse by such structures of domination, the female narrators prove that they are not simply subjected to such constrictions, but that they also challenge the colonial norms constraining them and strive to shape their own subjectivities.

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that autofiction, being in between genres and thus enabling the authors to adopt composite and multilayered narrative voices, holds great relevance in terms of the creation of alternative ways of representing women’s nomadic subjectivity. Such an effective intertwining of form and content has been observed in the comparative analysis of *Au pays de mes racines* and *L’amant*, in which the concept of in-betweenness characterizing the narrative mode of the texts is also reflected in their subject matter, as they revolve around the protagonists’ culturally hybrid experiences. The composite subjectivities presented in these works of autofiction epitomize the complexity of women’s identities, and are made all the more vivid and powerful precisely because of the adopted autofictional strategies, which further articulate such cultural in-betweenness both in terms of content and style.

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