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The Orphans of Love

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Abstract: The psychological tension between intimacy and distance, self-revelation, and estrangement accounts for much of the fascination and allure Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* and Isabel Allende's *The Japanese Lover* exert upon their readers. While both texts concern a knotty tangle of characters searching for love in the wreckage of the 20th Century, central to the narrative is the enigma of the absence. Love is a muted passion, a dialectical interplay between presence and absence, between creation and destruction, the "how much" the author reveals or conceals has to do with how much love can endure.
Keywords: Allende, Barthes, Duras, Nietzsche, Recalcati

Caravaggio's masterpiece "Basket of Fruits" (1599), with a slightly rotten apple on the front, foretells the fatal corruption of life. Similarly, love cannot last because desire compels an endless replacement of the object in order to remain desire. This manuscript is not about love as unity but love as division. Love is about distance, individuality, impossibility of doing and being one with the other, about the loneliness of the two or the many. The existence of the beloved is an unknown factor that can never be fully translated. In this sense, the other embodies what Barthes defines as *atopos*: "[t]he other whom I love and who fascinates me is atopos. I cannot classify the other, for the other is, precisely, Unique, the singular Image which has miraculously come to correspond to the specialty of my desire" (D 35).[1] The unintelligible nature of the other is what brings the Italian psychoanalyst and philosopher Massimo Recalcati to write: "there is no love that does not feed on lack" (118).[2] Famously, Jacques Lacan

[1] Atopy from the Greek *atopia*. The term is composed of *topos* 'place' plus the privative *alpha*. It translates as 'unusual, out of place'. Barthes defined it as "unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality" (34), referring to the circumstance. *A Lover's Discourse*, hereafter D.

[2] Translations from Italian are mine.

utters the same concept with another formula: "loving is to give what one does not have" (34). That is, to tell someone else our love is to admit that we are incomplete and to hope that the other can fulfil our lack. But referring to "lack," something that is missing, is also referring to the concept of absence. In other words, it is absence that triggers love and consequently its beauty. Otherwise, why would Ulisses have chosen the old Penelope to the immortality the young Calypsos had to offer?

With this in mind, I intend to analyze two texts which commonly considered as 'love stories,' are instead grounded on the notion of absence, in this vein they are stories of absences. Namely, Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* (*L'Amant,* 1984)[3] and Isabel Allende's *The Japanese Lover* (*El Amante Japonés,* 2015). The former clearly explores themes of colonialism, femininity, and poverty. Scholarship has often underlined the complex machinations of imperialism connected to the violation of land, country, and people, thus the brutal exploitation of native women as concubines for European men. [4] Due to its recent publication and the fact that it is not one of Allende's remarkable works, *The Japanese Lover* does not have an abundant corpus of scholarship. However, it has been analysed through issues of race and immigration by Ph.D. candidates.[5] At their core the books narrate a love story, more precisely a story of loves, the haunting evocation of a young girl's first love affair backdropped by foreign invasion. However, concealed this basic plot is a subtle dialectical activity between presence and absence, between creation and destruction, reality and void.[6] Accordingly, the narrative raises questions that might find answers after an in-depth analysis. This essay has a clear focus on the concept of love as absence and its implications. I am interested in the psychological notion of absence and in our mental perspectives divided between memory, which allows us to relive the past, and imagination, which allows us to create the future. All in all, this paper is about the identification of love with absence.[7] Love is a form of

[3] While the book is commonly translated into English as *The North China Lover*, Barbara Bray's translation, the one I am using, titles *The Lover* in accordance with the original French *L'Amant.*

[4] For example, see Thompson (2016) and Stoler (1989) for whom Orientalism is symbolized by a native woman "penetrated, silenced and possessed" (635).

[5] See Shabrang et al. (2020).

[6] For an in-depth analysis of Duras' works, see Cixous & Foucault (1976). For Allende's a classical reading is Patricia Hart (1989).

[7] This identification of love with absence in *The Lover* has been already noted, although briefly, by Marini (12) and Martinoir (93).

absence, a negativity at the base of the protagonists' being. The fundamental law which marks the novels' psychology is the paradoxical alternation between the creative force of love and its necessary absence. Separation, estrangement, emptiness, emotional entropy, replaces love's quest for wholeness. But in the context of postmodern and postcolonial writing the body often becomes the speech authors use to explore despair. Thus, sexuality denotes a liberating force from family misery or loneliness while silence is a means of conveying the unsaid and evoke emotions. This is the reason why I chose Duras' and Allende's texts among endless others: they exemplify the case. The inclusion of references to critical perspectives, particularly Barthes and Kristeva, adds depth to the analysis and provides a broader context for understanding the themes of memory, silence and sexuality in the novels. However, in order to unfold the thematic depth related to 'love as absence,' I will need first to establish a narrative connection between the two texts. This is what the next section is about.

Overlapping Narrative

Marguerite Duras' (1914–1996) work seems at its best when it remains elusive. Its most attractive aspect is the presence of a meaning that escapes the reader. It is a writing against which one has no hold. Properly, Michael Bishop argues about a closeness with poetic elements, motifs visible in modern French poetry such as atemporal or verbless structures, a fascination for indeterminacy and complexity.

The Lover, by far Duras' most fortunate work, is commonly considered an example of the *Roman à clef*. Indeed Duras, as much as the unnamed female protagonist, was born in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1914 and lived with her mother and two brothers in relative poverty after her father's death. At the age of seventeen, she returned to France. [8] "The story of one small part of my youth I've already written, more or less — I mean, enough to give a glimpse of it. Of this part, I mean, the part about the crossing of the river" (*The Lover*, 13). Without hesitation, we are allowed to take the nameless "I" to be Duras.[9] The influence of Duras' cultural heritage in her writing cannot

[8] Autobiographical references can be found in Ladimer (1999).

[9] Much has been written about Duras' colonial heritage. An interesting study on the ambivalence of racial relations depicted in the novel is in James Williams & Janet Sayers (2000) and Jack A. Jaeger (2001).

be underestimated. Alain Vircondelet notes that "her entire oeuvre feeds on sources in white Indochina" (13). Likewise, in her biography on Duras, Laure Adler writes that "Marguerite's life is full of accidents, ruptures [...] But the maternal land, the territory of origin, the true rooting place of her being will remain in colonial Indochina until the end of her life" (17).

However, readings merely grounded on the writer's biography seem reductive in terms of significance. It is a text strictly attached to the theoretical formulation of the Nouveau Roman, thus fragmented in its narrative voice, deliberately incoherent with themes that are not directly articulated but hinted. There are memories fixed into images of the narrator's childhood, above all her affair with an older businessman and the violence within her family. Perhaps the most significant of those mental photos is the moment she stands, fifteen-and-a-half, in gold lamé high heels and a man's hat on the ferry to Saigon: "[t]he image lasts all the way across" (15). In this regard, Carol Murphy is correct in saying that Duras' writing offers an "organic unity" of which Duras herself might not be aware of. Similarly, Janice Morgan on commenting about Duras' style writes: "[a]t times etched with a sharp sense of realism [...] yet, at other times, passing with a dream-like fluidity beyond any set boundaries of place and time, *L'Amant* creates a distinctive style all of its own" (272). It is the same Duras to justify the disconnection of her sentences: "[t]he story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line" (*The Lover,* 12). As to say that the reader is allowed only a glimpse into the narrative space. The dialogues filled with non-sequitur challenge the spatio-temporal linearity, the suggestive allusiveness not only creates indirect symbolism but it is also iconoclastic toward the conventions of character design. The autobiographical voice, the exploration of colonialism and racism, its erotic exoticism are factors that contribute to explaining the text's immediate success.[10] The reference to prostitution, rape, madness, and incest shifts the traditional romance into a postmodern experimentation.

Duras's tale is a liaison between a white relatively poor colonial girl and a Chinese businessman.[11] No names are mentioned in the narrative ergo implying "the way the lovers inevitably view each other; they are defined for each other by their separateness, their difference" (Morgan 274). The setting place is

[10] For an original comment on *L'Amant* editorial success see Genova (2003).

[11] In an interview, Duras states that the intense affair which she has lived and wrote about "a éclipsé les autres amours de ma vie" and has done so because it was "sans énoncé, sans déclaracion" (Marianne 1984).

colonial Indochina (now Vietnam) within the French colonial system in 1920s. A French woman looks back at her life in Saigon, in particular in 1929, the romance she had when she was just 15 with a wealthy Chinese man, twelve years her senior. The novel begins with the narrator being an adolescent, "I'm fifteen and a half" (11), returning to boarding school in Saigon from a holiday. It opens with the narrator crossing the Mekong Delta by ferry and ends with the girl crossing back over the same river, albeit this time with the excruciating knowledge of love: "the girl started up as if to go and kill herself in her turn, throw herself in her turn into the sea, and afterwards she wept because she thought of the man from Cholon" (83). The unnamed male lover, wealthy and influential, has his affairs controlled by the father; not a secondary character since it is him to forbid his son's relation with a white woman: "she's not the marrying kind, she'll run away from any marriage" (73). He is incapable of opposing his father's will: "I discover he hasn't the strength to love me in opposition to his father, to possess me, take me away" (40). Accordingly, he will later marry "a Chinese fiancée of the thirties," (85) as to comply with family traditions. Despite racial prejudice from both parties, the affair will turn out to be a turning point in both their lives: "[h]e tells me I'll remember this afternoon all my life, even when I've forgotten his face and name" (37) but "[y]ears after the war, after marriages, children, divorces, books" (85) she still remembers his name and his voice.

With *The Japanese Lover*, Isabel Allende, Chile's most internationally recognized fiction writer, introduces a novel that repeats the same disjointed narrative style. However, the first-person narrator is replaced by a third-person omniscient perspective, oscillating between an undefined present and an indistinct past. The text opens with the classical magic realist incipit: "[s]he could not have imagined she would find a perfect niche" (7). From an undefined present, the narrator evokes the future of a past moment, to immerse the reader into a labyrinthine mirror of time and space.[12] Inside the charmingly and eccentric Lark House Nursing Home (Berkeley, California) a residence for elder people, several characters meet and share their unique stories. In 1939, as Poland falls under the shadow of the Nazi persecution, "crowds baying their devotion to Hitler in Germany" (49), the young Alma is sent by her parents to live in safety in America, San Francisco. While Alma is adopted by her indulgent Belasco

[12] Common point of departure for a "magic narrative" is the past. The action is lodged in the past tense with the literary aim of placing a distance, spatial and temporal, between the present and the events narrated. For a detailed analysis see Castelli (2019).

relatives, her parents are ruthlessly obliterated by Hitler's death messengers. The war madness is revived in Alma's descriptions so visually that Seth, the nephew, and Irina, the carer, have the impressions to travel together with some millions of inmates on a train to Treblinka: "they went naked with them into the chamber of horrors, vanished with them in the chimney smoke" (63). As WWII is set in motion, she encounters her life-long love, Ichimei Fukuda, the tender son of the family's Japanese gardener. First separated by the war and then reunited, Alma, choosing comfort and social status over her love for Ichimei, later marries Nathaniel Belasco, her cousin, who carries hers and his own secrets.

Decades later, when Alma is nearing the end of her life she encounters Irina, a care worker who is forced to live in anonymity as a former victim of childhood trauma. With the skill of a narrator, it is Irina to reveal slowly to the reader Alma's secret love and the characters muted passions, each one attempting to love oneself after a life of absence.

Given different outlines, the two texts tend to converge in terms of images and significance. At first, is the female protagonists' most evident features: both the child *(The Lover*) and Alma begin their lives with the status of an emigrant. The child is a French girl in Vietnam, Alma is a Polish child in America. At some point in their existence, they both have an Asian lover, respectively Chinese and Japanese, successful men but somewhat always outsiders in spite of their success, ravaged by a fear that their passion never masters. Both texts confound the pain of a private melancholia with the psychic macrocosms of political horrors: survivors of European colonialism, the Holocaust, the Japanese-American internment camps, some are broken and some find a strength that they did not know they had.

The turning point in the biography of the female protagonists is a sea crossing. Some ten years before WWII, the little white girl, wearing a second-hand dress, heeled shoes, and a man's hat, is crossing the Mekong River on a ferry. Here she is about to meet the Chinese businessman with whom she will begin a once in a lifetime affair. Likewise, Allende places Alma at the port of Danzig (Poland), on the run from Europe which is about to be set on fire by the Nazis. As she bid farewell to her parents, "[t]hey grew smaller and smaller, more and more indistinct," she "found it impossible to return their farewell wave" (35). Furthermore, the climactic ending shares similarities with a somewhat metaphysical reunion between the lovers. The climatic finale bears affinity as well with a more or less metaphysical reencounter between the lovers. Undefined decades later, Duras has the male character in Paris making a phone call of

hope and despair: "[t]old her that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death" (85). Allende has the ghost of Ichimei accompanying Alma in her last earthly moments: "[i]t seemed as though Alma opened her eyes and repeated his name, […] they should be left alone for this final farewell" (242). In the light of the novels' final images, the distance that both writers have put between the lovers seems to identify love with some notion of absence.

Love is the master theme around which the narrative unfolds. Both novels depict interracial relationships, thus undermining the idea of the immutability of racial constructs. Particularly, in *The Lover* the condemnation and disavowal of the relationship by the narrator "because he was Chinese and one oughtn't to weep for that kind of lover" (82) and by the Chinese man's family, implies a cultural transgression. The father disapproves of his son's relationship with the white girl. Due to her race and lack of financial stability such a union would bring dishonour to his family. Similarly, it is Nathaniel, Alma's cousin in *The Japanese Lover*, to remind Alma that her love for Ichimei is not meant to be because "he's from another race, another social class, another culture, another religion, another economic level" (110). On the other hand, the fact that the Chinese man eventually marries within his race, and the unchangeable clandestinity of Alma and Ichimei's relationship, reinforce the fixity of racial boundaries in colonial Indochina as much as in modern America.

In addition to the recurring thematic similarities, there is also an allusion to incestuous relationships. The girl does not dance with her elder brother because she feels a "sinister attraction" (43) toward him and what attracts her to the younger brother is a "wild love I feel for him remains an unfathomable mystery to me" (78). The incestuous pattern is repeated in Allende's text with Alma marrying Nathaniel, her first cousin, to whom she will bear a child. Within this framework, we might want to consider Allende's novel as the homage she pays to Duras: style, dominant themes, and recurring motif overlap in a postmodern collage without ending.[13]

Narrative against the grain

In the *Symposium*, the fourth speaker is Aristophanes whose speech (189c–193d) is arguably the most famous myth on the origin of love. Plato has Aristo-

[13] As far as I know there is no documentation to back up the artistic relationship of influence. However, thematic and structural parallels are a common trope of postmodern fiction.

phanes recounting the story of lovers' search for a lost unity with the other half. At first men and women were united, they formed a fully-round person with the shape of a perfect apple. An androgynous figure "awesome in strength and might" (190b). As Zeus felt threatened by such perfection, man and woman were divided into two halves so to make them weaker:

> After the original nature of every human being had been severed in this way, the two parts longed for each other and tried to come together again (191a).

Considering this, love can be seen as the endeavour to reconcile the duality inherent in the human condition; we are all continually searching for the other half, we throw our "arms around one another in close embrace, desiring to be reunited" (191b), instinctively searching for the lost intimacy, affection, and original wholeness. Aristophanes terms love "the pursuit of the whole," which later Christianity will understand as re-union with the supreme being that is God. But while we undeniably long for each other, is it love really the need to make unity out of duality? The essential subject matter of Duras' and Allende's text is constructed along the lines of this fundamental opposition, unity and duality, to some extent Eros and Thanatos.

At this altitude, Nietzsche's aesthetic of self, rather than Plato, seems to be a valid theory to explain the otherwise tragic dimension of the texts under scrutiny. Nietzsche considers the creation of identity as the act of distancing oneself from the Other. Without much elaboration, he sometimes refers to the "pathos of distance." *Conditio sine qua non* for a lasting experience of love is physical and erotic distance: "[t]he magic and the most powerful effect of women is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, *actio in distans*; but this required first of all and above all – *distance*" (GS 60).[14] Action at a distance requires that the lovers maintain the profound image of difference that one has of the other. In the language of Newtonian physics, action at a distance is the concept that one body can affect another without any external intervention between them. The bodies are separated by empty space, yet one moves the other. In the language of love "action at a distance" does not distance one from the other, instead it is, in Nietzsche's skeptical view, the only possibility for a harmonious relation. A woman must hypnotize men by making herself

[14] Abbreviations for titles of Nietzsche's work: *The Gay Science* (GS), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z), *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE).

inaccessible, simulating a lack of love for "[i]sn't that the counsel of love?" (GS 67). Otherwise stated, a woman's artistry lies in her power to dissimulate identity, of deferring significance.

The same concept is marked in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885): "[h]igher than love of the neighbor is love of the farthest" (Z 44). To think of what it truly means, the act of love in its purest definition is the pursuit of an irreconcilable fulfillment. Nietzsche demands of us to love beyond all possibility of satisfaction either because of a rejection from the beloved's part or because, as in a painting of Magritte, the lovers remain incommunicable, or confrontational, to each other. Paradoxically the journey of love becomes for Nietzsche a game in which taking off the veil that surfaces one's identity is putting on another one: "around every profound spirit there continually grows a mask, owing to the constantly false, […] interpretation of every word he utters" (BGE 51). The lover's evaluation of each other provides to creating the mask which consequently contributes to maintaining the difference or distance. In a similar fashion, the deconstructive discourse of Jaques Derrida brings the French philosopher to suggest a fundamental incompatibility of feminine and masculine. Derrida allegorizes woman as distance itself: "she is the *abyss* of distance, the distancing of distance, the division of spacing, distance itself" (358). But what is that remains if the object of love is absent, or altogether nonexistent? Nietzsche answers with "the ring of recurrence" (Z 184), that is the eternal return, the lust for eternity of those who have lived according to a self-reliant life-affirming attitude. Less empathically, but perhaps more realistically, Duras and Allende offer an alternative solution.

Love in absence

What remains of a love story, is what we call deception, an episode endowed with a fervent beginning and a final withdrawal. Thus, love becomes *absence*. Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) is a fragmented text that contains a lover's point of view. In the whimsical phenomenon of love, absence is related to the other, it "can exist only as a consequence of the other" (D 13). That is to say, it is 'the Other' to leave while 'I' remain. Therefore, absence turns to abandonment: "[a]morous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves" (*ibid.*). *I* is present, *you* is absent. The child's relation with the Chinese man and that of Alma with the Japanese lover typifies this version of love. Love in absence.

That of Marguerite Duras is a melancholic tragedy. The grandeur of the inexplicable turns history into metaphysics, the metaphysics of private life, the inexplicability of love, a grief that it is not grief but death. In Julia Kristeva's words, "the malady of death" (227). In her study *Black Sun* (1987), Kristeva places Duras' writing within the space of depression, which she terms *la maladie du grief* [the malady of death]. "The texts [*Duras'*] domesticate the malady of death, they fuse with it, […] There is no purification in store for us at the conclusion of those novels written on the brink of illness, no improvement, no promise of a beyond, […] that might provide a bonus of pleasure in addition to the revealed evil" (227–8). While no one could deny *The Lover*'s inherent melancholia, one may question where such a melancholia originates from. It originates from absence. "Very early in my life, it was too late" (10). With this line, Duras captures the tone of the entire narration: recollection, loss, past, and present that exist simultaneously. "I grew old at eighteen" (10) which is another way to say that even the future is already present and decided. Memory is held up in captivity, a metaphysical fraud to communicate between ages, times, seasons: "[t]he memory of the little white girl must have been there" (84). This is the condition of the Chinese lover as he is incapable of reaching desire for another woman. Almost naturally, these passages are laced with motifs of separation, sadness, conflict, and desire, imparting a sense of nostalgia**.** Veiled, haunted images frame remembrance of past things. The girl looks toward what she no longer sees. Nostalgia emerges as an aesthetic of loss, a vague feeling incapable of compensating for her youth. The return to the origins of the self through memory brings the text near the bildungsroman tradition not unlike Proust's Marcel or Joyce's Stephen, young artists on the path to personal enlightenment. Accordingly, the child conveys a message larger than her intended meaning: "I feel I'm going on a journey" (13). If we assume the girl being Duras, then *The Lover* is the story of a girl and a woman becoming an artist.

Her position is uncertain, she might be subject to violence "a fire, or a rape, or an attack by pirates" or general accident as "a fatal mishap on the ferry" (14). On the other hand, her provocative clothes reveal a girl already aware of her sexual power: "a dress of real silk, […] almost transparent" […] a sleeveless dress with a very low neck" (15). But it is the man's hat she is wearing to signal "the crucial ambiguity of the image" (16). The publisher John Calder reads this image as one of her attempts to masculinise herself. Indeed, by borrowing masculinity from that hat the girl can shape herself into a different self than the one reserved to her by colonial expectations. The hat not only differentiates the child from other women, but it also combines sexuality and money into a

single item, both of which she uses to alter her external world.[15] Scholars tend to refer to Duras' female protagonist as "the child," yet her sexual awareness places her rightfully into the domain of womanhood: "[f]or the past three years white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets, and my mother's men friends have been kindly asking me to have tea with them while their wives are out playing tennis at the Sporting Club" (19). If this reasoning is correct, then additional elements such as race and money come to play a role in the characters' analysis, consequently spoiling the innocence of their relationship.

They never refer to each other by their names. Instead, the narrator outlines her lover using epithets like "the lover from Cholon" (73) or "the Chinese from Cholon" (43) and refers to herself as "the white girl" (75) or "the little girl" (65). In addition to defining the characters according to colonial categories, these terms also reveal their views of one another. Race is the primary means of identification for the pair, a sign of how pervasive these concepts are. Trying to confide in her lover about her colonial family life, the girl confesses: "how it was just so difficult to get food and clothes, to live, in short, on nothing but my mother's salary" (38). Revealing an already mature consciousness, she tells him that her "mother's unhappiness took the place of dreams" (38). Sex, therefore, becomes a redemptive experience in which money threatens the logic of love: "[h]e says, You only came because I'm rich. I say that's how I desire him, with his money, that when I first saw him he was already in his car, in his money" (34). The lover claims that he is in love with the narrator; the narrator insists that she desires him for his money. But to reduce the love affair to desire for money it would be to ignore the novel's psychological complexity. Evidently, when poverty is concerned, so it is money. From both the mother's and the lover's perspective, the involvement of money transforms the girl into a sexual object for sale: "that's why the mother lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute" (24). The language that Duras uses tricks the reader into considering the female body as another commodity: "he could do nothing with my body any more" (80), but that would be a misinterpretation. Within the dynamic of colonialism, the girl benefits from the Chinese merchant and the lover is closer

[15] This is a feminist reading grounded on the idea of the girl breaking racial and gendered power structures. Important note but a line of thought that would take me too far from my line of research, Karen Ruddy points out that the girl "forces her lover to mime the feminized image of Asian masculinity in the white colonial imagination, an image that constructs Asian men as weak, submissive, subordinate, and at times asexual" (91). Matter of fact, the girl, empowered by her nudity, describes the lover as vulnerable, lacking masculine strength, to the extent that there is "nothing masculine about him but his sex" (*The Lover* 33).

to Western (white) culture. Yet none of the protagonists is in a clear position of power.

The narrator, the coloniser, is commonly construed as influential compared to the local Vietnamese and other races at large: "[t]here's the difference of race, he's not white, he has to get the better of it, that's why he's trembling" (29). Yet, her financial status distances her from the stereotypical image of white elites. On the contrary, the lover's race establishes him as an outsider, but his wealth puts him in a dominant position. And because the lover is "wearing European clothes" (19) the reference to Western capitalist values is soon made. Zoë Thompson's comments seem relevant here: "[d]espite her privilege, the girl is not impervious to the violence of colonialism; she recognizes the reproduction of colonial carelessness in the lover's attitudes, and such talk is particularly painful, [...], when she suggests that the shamelessness of being poor has brought her to this intimacy with the lover" (18). In this sense, Duras subverts the logic of power grounded on the normative of (white) coloniser's exploitation of the indigenous. The girl's poverty displaces her from the power and privilege that accompanies her status as colonial. The lover's wealth transforms him into an opportunity.

Under this perspective love is a truce: "the experience of sexual desire in love is the experience of a respite from the pain of the world" (Recalcati 48–49). For the unnamed characters, it is a time of beauty that can suspend the time of the world, in their case the inevitability of separation. Throughout the novel, she is unable to say whether she loves the Chinese man or not. Instead, she brushes aside the question with an easy reference to his money. But this is a misleading answer. It is rather a love that is fed on protection, "[h]e gives me my shower, washes me, rinses me, he adores that, he puts my make-up on and dresses me, he adores me" (50), fear, "[h]e often weeps because he can't find the strength to love beyond fear" (40), and despair of losing: "the pleasure it gave was inconsolable" (63). When they finally accept the fact that their liaison is impossible and condemned from the outset, love takes the form of absence and absence takes the shape of an inevitable abandonment, a real separation or death that seems inherent and almost predestined. As the Chinese lover begs her to stay, she refuses: "I refused to stay with him. I didn't give any reasons" (63). The refusal to explain is another form of absence, it is the whole of her universe that falls short of reason. It is the sea that takes her away. The parallelism is rather obvious: the lover approaches the child from a distance at the beginning, the lover contemplates the woman from a distance as she sails away. The journey is over and as they move toward another

destiny, life becomes once more a matter of absence. Hellerstein's statement is representative: "distance expresses a fundamental absence which appears now to have been an essential part of their love from the very beginning" (55).

Isabel Allende's text is grounded on the same logic. The house at Sea Cliff reminds closely another of Allende's house, the *big house* on the corner, where generations of the Trueba family live in *The House of The Spirits*: "[t]he house at Sea Cliff was so vast, and its inhabitants always so busy, that the children's games went unnoticed" (45). Loyal to her previous writing the narration is infused with elements of magic. The elders are accompanied permanently by their dead, the Japanese lover has supernatural power to control his body temperature, not least his final appearance as a spirit, ghost of sorts, to escort Alma to the afterlife. Allende guides Alma into her journey through life (Bildung), thus the reader observes her 'process of education:' the girl disembarking from Poland, the young Alma in Boston, the artist, the wife, the lover, and the grandmother. Throughout the book, love takes on many forms. Alma is more like a daughter to Isaac Belasco (the uncle) than any of his biological daughters. His high regard for her leads him to turn a blind eye when she marries his son, Nathaniel, her first cousin, since he would prefer she stayed close to him. While the love between Alma and Nathaniel may be more fraternal than passionate, it is unshakable nevertheless. Alma and Ichimei, Irina and Seth, Lillian and Isaac, are all sweet fictions for whom the reader easily falls. But above all, *The Japanese Lover* is a story of absences where absence is abandonment of what one once possessed.

It is the absence of Japan in the biography of Takao Fukuda who was forced to leave his native land to become a gardener in America when he "realized that he could not follow a military career as those of his lineage" (65). But destiny had in store some different plans. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor (1941), Japanese living in America were submitted to anti-Japanese campaigns. Out of fear of an imminent Japanese invasion on the Pacific coast, in March 1942 the Japanese population was evacuated (or deported) to isolated areas of the interior (prison camps) under the suspicion of spying and collaborating with the enemy. Formerly lively domestic spaces were left untended, ransacked, defaced, and looted in a scene shockingly reminiscent of the Jews' tragedy.[16] Accordingly, the Fukada family was first imprisoned in the Tanforan hippodrome

[16] Over 115,000 Japanese Americans were despatched to "relocation" camps on the West Coast of the United States when World War II broke out. Most of them were interned there for the duration of the conflict. A detailed study is in Sandra C. Taylor (1993) and Tateichi (1999).

in San Bruno, California, and then in Topaz, Utah. Described as lifeless and wracked by constant high winds and fierce dust storms, the desert environment exemplifies the irrational harshness of life. Food and water are scarce, living conditions are poor and unsanitary, prisoners are exposed to hot summers and freezing winters. Dehumanizing lines, roll calls, rations, and curfews set the tone of the humiliating conditions: "Takao was so weary and humiliated to the depths of his being that he sat down on the floor with his elbows on his knees and buried his head in his hands" (76). Abandonment is the condition of those Japanese American families who faced devastation upon returning home, the drama to rebuild ravaged households, families, and fractured livelihoods.

Irina suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Absence to her is the safe support of a family. Daughter of an unknown soldier and a woman forced into prostitution (88), she is twelve years old when she is sent to America from a little village in Moldova only to be later raped and filmed by her drug-addicted stepfather. She is hesitant to acknowledge her feelings toward Seth because of her past, but Seth's love, she will discover, is loyal and protective.

For Alma absence is silence. Emigrated to America from Warsaw, Poland, when she was just seven years old, she slept in the wardrobe of her foster parents' house as form of protection. Absence is therefore the silence of her friends, her brother, her parents, all dead under the Nazi dark power.

Absence is abandonment. When Nathaniel decided to go to Harvard, Alma took his decision as a personal affront, another one to add to the list of those who had abandoned her: "[s]he concluded it was her destiny to lose everyone she loved most" (107). Absence is secrecy as the nature of everyone's relationship. Alma and Ichimei share an affair made of secret letters and clandestine meetings. Indeed, they are both married to respectively Nathaniel and Delphine. Alma keeps her relationship with Ichimei a secret from her family and friends except for Nathaniel, she also keeps her pregnancy secret from Ichimei. Irina's past, object of child pornography, is a secret that impacts her ability to form any kind of relationship. Nathaniel hides his homosexuality until the very end when close to death he finally confesses it to Alma.

Absence is the courage Alma did not have to marry Ichimei. Allende creates Ichimei grounded on Western stereotypes of Asians, some sort of basic Orientalism. Thus, Japanese reticence and reserve are embodied in Ichimei's

personality, meditative and restrained:[17] "[i]t was said of him that he had a monk's vocation, and that in Japan he would have been a novice in a Zen monastery" (99) and "he maintained the reserve typical of his character and culture" (133). Alma, on the other hand, is meant to be a daring female of strong features (109) and passionate nature (133). After discovering her pregnancy, and fearing to be trapped in a life of hardship within the Japanese community, the "horror of poverty" and the shame of "social pressure and racial" (182), she chose the protection of her own environment. Rather unexpectedly, Allende makes of Alma a coward and selfish woman. The shame that Alma avoids is the same that the young Duras has to suffer for being a poor white in Vietnam: "[w]e're united in a fundamental shame at having to live" (*The Lover,* 44).

Alma suffers from what Du Bois terms "double consciousness" that is the African-American condition, a dual mode of existence in which one is American but is also a black American. [18] The necessity of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, in Du Bois' definition the white race, seems to reflect Alma's defining action. The horror of social prejudice surrounding interracial marriages, the fear of being looked at with contempt and pity, made her turn back on her present. It is Alma's cultural ambivalence that led her to abandon what seemed to be a most natural choice: "Alma admitted to herself that her greatest prejudice was that of social class, which she never managed to overcome" (182). Led by the sentiment of the age, Alma leaves Ichimei without much of a reason as much as Duras' child had done: "[w]hen you left me without giving any reason I could not understand it" (185), Ichimei writes in his letter dated 1969. Hers, however, is less a choice of race hatred, that it is a logic of material prospects: "Ichimei […] was always going to be a simple gardener rather than develop […] into a proper business" (177). In this vein, Allende does not liberate Alma from the gaze of the double consciousness, instead she traps her protagonist in a life of secrets and deceptions. Alma goes through love as through an emergency exit, she escapes from it as from everything else in her life. She escapes from Europe, from Ichimei due to his lower station in life,

[17] Beth E. Jorgensen offers a detailed summary of the major critical analyses of Allende's narrative (in Feal 130) and underlines Allende's frequent use of stereotypes, particularly for minorities.

[18] In "The Souls of Black Folk," first published in 1903, Du Bois famously writes: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, […] One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals" (5). Eric J. Sundquist defines the book as "the founding text of modern African American thought" (15).

from Nathatinel to whom she is never fully committed and from her son who indeed grows up with his grandparents. The only consoling moment is Alma's awareness: "I was unable to give up on my security, and so I was trapped in convention" (138).

In the end, absence is distance. The invisible connection between Alma and Ichimei made distance never insuperable. Separated by the same exacerbated atmosphere, Alma and Ichimei share a lifetime of sensuous and emotionally fulfilling love. Confirming Nietzsche's belief, distance makes it more intense filling their relationship with yearning rather than destroying it.

The fires of the flesh consume life and death. Yet, there are so many ways to be alive or dead. *The Lover* has two characters who spend their nights making love, knowing that death, regarded as the end of the affair, is approaching. *The Japanese Lover* has two characters who write to each other about a love that was given and rejected. The participants desire one another, understand each other, live together, change together, see each other change, want one another to live, want one another to die. Sometimes, they find, not in their hearts or minds, but in their own body a consuming complicity. But it is never enough. There is always an absence that makes wholeness unattainable. This is the paradox Barthes describes with the example of the child who took apart an alarm clock trying to figure out the secret of time: "I am searching the other's body, as if I wanted to see what was inside it, as if the mechanical cause of my desire were in the adverse body (I am like those children who take a clock apart in order to find out what time is)" (71). But as Proust rightly put it, the Other is always elsewhere. Can sexuality fill the gap? Undeniably those are texts that describe physical love. It is a narrative where lust more often than not overcomes reason. The disturbing image of a 15 years old girl having sexual intercourse with a man twelve years her senior pales when confronted with her desires: "She begs him to do that" (33), "I asked him to do it again and again" (36). In the same way, Alma forgets any social prejudice when she meets Ichimei at the motel: "their naked, quivering bodies; each drinking in the heat, savor, and smell of the other; the texture of skin and hair; the marvel of losing themselves in desire until they were exhausted, of dozing in one another's arms for a moment, only to renew their pleasure; the jokes, laughter, and whispered secrets; the wonderful universe of intimacy" (133).

The lover offers the external gaze which allows her to become fully herself. The heroine's experience of self-discovery happens through the sexual initiation which the lover offers, thus, it is also a moment of liberation. In Duras it is an emancipation from the family misery: "[t]he sea, formless, simply beyond

compare" (33), while in Allende it is a release from an atavistic solitude: "[t]he need for her to know she was loved was insatiable" (134). For both the female participants is valid what Nina Hellerstein writes about the white girl: "[t]he experience of sexuality and love removes her from their [*family*] universe and helps her to construct her own, independent world" (47). However, sexuality cannot be but a short-term answer. After all, the physical distance that the authors write between the main actors implies that those are not stories of fulfilment. Absence and silence, therefore, serve to render the evidence of things unsaid. One cannot avoid the impression that something has been left out. The failure of communication is tied to the heart of the aesthetic practice. As an imaginist attempt, language is meant to suggest, to evoke that which is meant to remain unspoken. Alma and Ichimei spend years without speaking; an irregular correspondence keeps track of time. The Chinese lover cannot find words to express his new feeling: "[h]e scarcely speaks to her any more. Perhaps he thinks she won't understand any longer what he'd say about her, about the love he never knew before and of which he can't speak" (73). Nor can she express a sentiment she never knew: "[t]hey are silent all evening long," "[t]hey are silent during the drive" (75).

Thus, it is not sexuality to fill the gap, but silence.

What to do next? After despair has taken the place once occupied by a divine bliss, after fullness has been emptied of significance what remains to be done? Barthes suggests that forgetfulness is the only remedy against the lover: "I am, intermittently, unfaithful. This is the condition of my survival; for if I did not forget. I should die" (D 14). On the contrary, recurring symbols of memory connect *The Lover* and *The Japanese Lover* always keeping absence as the common denominator. More than once, the reader observes Alma observing herself through the mirror, "she studied herself in the mirror" (133), although struggling to recognize herself. According to Kristeva, mirrors' function is to "magnify their melancholy to the point of violence and delirium" (257). Regardless of her melancholia, Alma made a point of recording time starting from her own body. The sea crossing is clearly symbolic, it is a movement toward adulthood. The passage is of course dangerous. Beneath the boat, the water threatens death, destruction, insanity. In the beginning it is the current, in the end it is the suicide of the young man who jumps overboard (*The Lover*) and the despair of a forcible separation (*The Japanese Lover*). Drowning is a metaphoric image throughout the narrative. The child's mother drowns in debt and insanity; the Chinese lover drowns in fear and passivity before his father, the child drowns in her own doubts. Simultaneously, Alma is weighed down

by her wrong choices, Irina is pulled down by a nightmarish past and history succumbs to man's evil intentions. And for all of them, the past drowns in time, in the murky depths of sorrow and separation. Decades later they try to connect the dots, so to transform life into something that resembles a significance. But memory is fragmented, things that were or should be certain are folded into evanescence, forgetfulness, suspects. The child does not remember her outfit: "I can't remember the shoes I used to wear in those days, only certain dresses" (15), the older Duras cannot recall her childhood: "[i]n the books I've written about my childhood I can't remember, suddenly, what I left out, what I said" (24). Similarly, an already 82 years old Alma is subject to the same fate. As she tries to remember for her grandson's book, "she pieced together the fragments of her biography, spicing them with touches of fantasy, allowing herself some exaggeration and white lies" (142). Letters and photos are the symbols Allende uses to recall memories. The letters between Alma and Ichimei, the photos that Irina sorts out for the reader's sake: "[a]s she sorted through Alma's boxes, Irina had been gradually discovering the Belasco family" (51). It is erosion that tortures memory. We edit memory with every recollection; some parts are cast into shadow; others are simply distorted. The act of remembering is both a regaining and a losing process. Time, as processed by the child and by Alma, yields to contradictions and adjustments. There are repetitions and clarifications, endless commas, hesitation of the spirit, changes of mood, refutations and sudden confessions. It has taken a life to understand what life was.

A Non-Cathartic Literature?

Discussing Duras' writing in relation to the horrors of WWII and the impact that it had on the individual psyche, Kristeva writes that "[s]uch a confrontation leads to an aesthetic of awkwardness on the one hand and to a noncathartic literature on the other" (225). Kristeva's reference to "aesthetic of awkwardness" has to do with Duras' seemingly careless grammatical structure defiant of linguistic conventionality. Simultaneously, the stylistic shrinkage is accompanied by a narrative that remains always undecidable, thus non-cathartic. By the same token, Marcelle Marini comments on the atmosphere of disaster immanent Duras' works: "Marguerite Duras's strength is to hazard a discourse somewhere between 'a charm that would enact a rescue' and 'a suicidal love at first sight,' the death drive where what is called sublimation is said to originate"

(56). If we take Alma's biography as the focal point, the same definition might be applied to Allende's text. Ichimei's ghost that she sees in her final moment is the haunting image of her wrong choice. Seemingly, not even here there is anything cathartic. Both Duras' and Allende's are stories characterized by an unbridgeable solitude, almost brutal. It must be the excruciating sensation of those who have betrayed their destiny. Psychoanalysts are often among the strongest opponents of love as a promise that demands to last forever.[19] On the other hand, the psychoanalyst Recalcati writes that "the promise of love is in fact a promise that is not afraid to evoke eternity" (23). It may be so; in the end, the glory of love is shrinkable to a simple question: "[w]hy is it better to last than to burn?" (23) asks Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse.* As if in a dialogue in the distance, Recalcati replies: "desire burns or lasts lifeless. There is no possibility that love lasts by burning. Lasting and burning are mutually exclusive: if it burns it doesn't last and if it lasts it doesn't burn" (100). If love is reducible to this dichotomy, then of course it cannot possibly be cathartic in any way. But I think the texts I analyzed are subject to a wider view.

The female protagonists are depicted in a position of vulnerability. If love becomes a power struggle, Duras' contenders share a common sense of vulnerability, the girl because of her impoverished status, the Chinese lover because of the racist gaze of white colonials. More at large, it is the vagueness of the entire relationship to make the pair vulnerable: "[s]he could say she doesn't love him. She says nothing. Suddenly, all at once, she knows, knows that he doesn't understand her, that he never will" (37). Persuaded that their relation is socially impossible, the girl convinces herself she cannot love and consequently she is not troubled by the materialistic trend the liaison has taken. But when she hears "the burst of Chopin" (83) on the ferry to France her conviction becomes a doubt and the doubt is about to become despair: "suddenly she wasn't sure she hadn't loved him with a love she hadn't seen because it had lost itself in the affair like water in sand and she rediscovered it only now, through this moment of music flung across the sea" (83). Likewise, Alma has been in a condition of vulnerability since she was a child. First threatened by the bombing, then orphan in a foreign country. When she is an old woman of 82 years, her vulnerability is her age: "Alma appeared strong for her age, he told her, but the truth was she was delicate, had high blood pressure and a weak heart, and was in the early stages of Parkinson's disease, which was

[19] See D. Leader (1998): "A promise might seem like a blessing, but at its horizon is more often a farewell than a future" (33).

why her hands shook" (30). The clandestinity of her relation with Ichimei is by definition fragile. Yet, outside clandestinity, prejudice would have destroyed it. And if it had been revealed, it would have vanished: "the one thing she could not reveal, because if she did Ichimei would vanish, and with him her only reason to continue living" (142).

The fragile equilibrium of the protagonists' lives mirrors the text structure constructed wholly around the subtle link between love and death. The image of death in all its forms (slow decay, departures, wars, the atomic bomb, the brutality of murder, suicide) is compensated by the poetic narrative. The text moves toward silence as life moves toward death or separation. Love therefore does not unify as the Platonic myth wants us to believe but divides, breaks, exposes our vulnerability highlighting the forms of our lack. In this case, the death of a love is not only the death of one's self which loses a fundamental support, but also the death of meaning, meaning that love had assured. "When a love ends it never ends, therefore only one love, but also and above all the world that the two have created" (Recalcati, 103). Aware of this, to compensate for absence, Marguerite Duras' and Isabel Allende's world is on the whole a world where, despite 'death,' people survive.

The novels' title is the trick the authors have used to make up for what is left unsaid. Through its creation, the narrator compensates for the domination of negative forces that lurk beneath the surface of the protagonists' emotions and relationships. The title certifies that in spite of silence and absence, love is what remains. It is precisely because love was never expressed or acknowledged that memories come back much later in the protagonists' life with inexhaustible richness, suggesting the contours of a content that no longer is. There is no possibility to forget without remembering. Those texts with their memories are written with the intention of remembering, through the evocative power of words or a photograph, those we loved. Accordingly, *The Lover* and *The Japanese Lover* are less about the lover than about how we love. Loves that are passionate, familial, unrequited or timeless, vulnerable or invulnerable as in some cases, the novels demonstrate the wide spectrum of emotions that powerfully links two strangers. Ultimately, it is the story that triumphs.

Duras' finale remains open to possibility. After the narrator's departure, the lover marries a Chinese heiress. Later in France, she learns that her younger brother was killed in World War II, then she is told about her mother's death, and finally the death of her elder brother. Although she mentions having a son of her own and a husband who still lives, she does not go into detail about either. Her descriptions instead focus on two society ladies she is friendly with

in Paris. If in Saigon, she longed for financial independence, these European relationships hint that she has achieved it. Decades after their affair ended, the lover and his wife visit Paris. It is his phone call to testify about the mythic nature of love, of a passion undiminished by time and enduring till death. "Told her that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death" (85). Distance embodies physical absence, but it is memory that fills the absence as to entitle absence to the status of love. Again, she gives no response. The reader is allowed to read here a new beginning.

Somewhere along the line, Allende creates a purification of sorts. Ichimei's last letter displays a complete surrender to the values of simplicity and universal peace of the Oomoto religion: "[i]t's fantastic to be alive. We are still seventeen years old, my Alma" (248).[20] It shows a character without fears, guilt, shame, or human needs in his serene acceptance of old age and inevitability. It might as well be, as Ichimei believes, that there is no past nor future, but everything takes place simultaneously in the universe's infinite magnitude. And if this is correct, then those who love remain together forever. But it is with one of the last scenes that Allende offers a promise of a beyond. Ichimei has been dead for three years now. Although she can no longer talk to him or touch him, Alma honours her relationship with him by regularly resending herself his letters and gardenias, thus allowing herself to remember and sample his love, despite his death. It is the beauty of this image to heighten the life that remains. Love that cannot be fixed into an immortal touch re-performs itself in writing, in a photo, in a sudden memory. So it is that we rediscover the past.

Of course, to write the story, to recall it, is to undo the real one. To trace back what one remembers is to have some of it break away, leaving the object itself forever altered. There is something forbidden in recalling painful memories but as we do it, they are all the more vivid as they rise to recollection. And if it is love the memory that is recalled, then with Dostoyevsky love saves us from the wound of the world. The excess of the power of remembrance brings in another excess: need. "Absence is the figure of privation; simultaneously, I desire and I need. Desire is squashed against need" (D 16). Unlike Barthes, who believes that "the lover's discourse is in a sense a series of No Exits" (D 142), Duras (the child) and Allende (Alma) sublimate life into art in order to fill the immense vacuum of absence. What Duras and Allende have done, in a cathartic

[20] Founded in 1892, categorized as one of Japan New Religion, it recognizes one Supreme God that fosters all things and lives in the universe. Unlike monotheistic religions, Oomoto refers to the existence of gods; yet they are all essentially the same and come from only one source.

attempt, is sublimate their personal suffering into fiction, therefore reinforcing the Romantic myth that suffering is needed in order to create art and to express individual uniqueness. And this is their tribute to love and its lovers.

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