

## Behind Closed Doors : Postcolonial Domesticity, Whiteness, and the Making of *petits Blancs*

- 1 In his influential work *Everyday Life : Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Michael Sheringham concludes his reflection on the theorization of everydayness by pointing out figures and spaces that he identifies as pathways to a better understanding of the quotidian. Amongst the potential subjects of inquiry considered to be worthy of “close attention”, the domestic space is listed as a site that should receive more sustained critical consideration<sup>1</sup>. Given the book’s scope and the type of texts cited to highlight the connection between theory and fiction in which the idea of private lived space is central<sup>2</sup>, this recommendation was most likely not based on any assessment of critical trends in Francophone postcolonial studies. Sheringham’s point will nevertheless resonate with literary critics interested in this field as its relevance to postcolonial concerns is striking : it highlights the fact that most works dealing with spatiality develop a primarily theoretical approach that favors larger structures than the domestic sphere ; and literary studies that do address the subject of postcolonial domesticity rarely focus on Francophone texts<sup>3</sup>. This essay, then, will attempt to contribute to the rearticulation of France’s postcolonial cartography while affording the notion of the “postcolonial everyday” a more Francophone inflexion<sup>4</sup>. Building on the productive intersection between the domestic and the postcolonial that has already fostered new ways of thinking about race in other contexts, the objective will be, through the analysis of Leïla Slimani’s second novel *Chanson douce* (2016)<sup>5</sup>, to reflect on the contemporary production of Frenchness in relation to traces of colonial discourse. Ultimately, beyond remapping French postcolonial experience and exposing a subtle dimension of colonial heritage, my argument aims at illustrating one of the ways in which the politics of whiteness, based on the active construction of the *petit Blanc* figure, permeate the French racialized everyday.
- 2 *Chanson douce* was awarded the *prix Goncourt*, France’s most prestigious literary award, and enjoyed great commercial success revived in 2018 with the publication of the paperback edition –which remained in the top 10 for sales of fiction from May to September– and of the English translations aimed at the British and American markets<sup>6</sup>. Taking place in a Parisian bourgeois setting similar to Slimani’s first novel<sup>7</sup>, the text recounts the story of a young couple’s relationship with a seemingly perfect nanny, Louise, who eventually murders the two children of whom she had been hired to take care. As the final event (Louise’s crime and suicide attempt) is unveiled in the very first lines, the heterodiegetic narration focuses on the exploration –through a prolonged analepsis, itself interrupted by short second-degree analepses– of the complex dynamics that underlie the everyday life of this *ménage à trois* until the tragedy : the professional nature of the relationship is disrupted by the inherent intimacy of the situation, and the characters develop antagonistic emotions that feed growing power struggles between them. Relying on the narrative codes of the psychological thriller, the text can then also be read as a neo-naturalist novel exploring various aspects of the quotidian and its social ramifications, from the difficulty to reconcile the demands of a professional career with family life, to France’s *fracture sociale* and, most importantly to the purposes of this article, its *fracture coloniale*.

- 3 The commitment of *Chanson douce* to postcolonial questions is based first and foremost on the “outside the walls/inside the walls” dynamic, presented as a partial *huis clos*, that underpins the story. The opening of the narrative establishes the driving forces of the diegesis by suggesting a clear correlation between, on the one hand, the postcolonial racism with which Myriam, who is Muslim and of Maghrebi origin, is confronted in the public space and, on the other, her attitude inside the apartment. Following Myriam’s decision to go back to work after the birth of their second child, Adam, the couple starts interviewing nannies. The young mother’s refusal to hire a woman of Maghrebi origin for fear that a potential “solidarité d’immigrés” would develop (CD 28), and her refusal to teach Arabic to her children and foster their hybrid identities can only be explained by the ideological climate and her will to configure her private life accordingly<sup>8</sup>. The home is therefore presented as a safer space for the minority character who regains a sense of empowerment and a form of control that too often seem to elude her in wider society despite her professional status as a lawyer and her privileged financial situation. Her influence on the construction and policing of domestic space is carried out as a response to the realities outside the walls, knowing that any effort to seal the home hermetically is vain as dominant discourses eventually find their way in. The apartment is an illusory safe haven –not the cocoon “loin du monde et des autres” that the young mother thought she could build for herself (CD 18)– where Myriam remains vulnerable. For instance, the longing for an idealized imagined space is quickly shattered during a dinner party when a friend alludes to the theory of the “Grand Remplacement”, or reverse colonization, while ranting against the deliquescence of supposedly Arabized public schools (CD 65). This moment establishes the home as a space where social violence and exclusion are latent and can erupt at any time, in other words a porous and political entity that is part of a collectivity<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, while the apartment does reflect larger power structures, its metonymic relationship with the public sphere is complex –it is far from only echoing discourses around the figure of the “Arab”–, and blurred by the distinct inner dynamics of the domestic interior. Indeed, adopting a postcolonial perspective entails a form of reversal requiring focus on questions of power, oppression, and marginalization as they also relate to the figure of the white nanny. The first postcolonial element inserted into the text actually refers to this character as one of the two epigraphs is drawn from Rudyard Kipling’s “His chance in Life”, a short story which depicts colonial life in British India<sup>10</sup> :

Mademoiselle Vezzis était venue de par-delà la Frontière pour prendre soin de quelques enfants chez une dame [...]. La dame déclara que mademoiselle Vezzis ne valait rien, qu’elle n’était pas propre et qu’elle ne montrait pas de zèle. Pas une seule fois il ne lui vint à l’idée que mademoiselle Vezzis avait à vivre sa propre vie, à se tourmenter de ses propres affaires, et que ces affaires étaient ce qu’il y avait au monde de plus important pour mademoiselle Vezzis. (CD 11)

Through the allusion to the hidden private life of Miss Vezzis, this fundamental element of the paratext not only asserts the postcolonial from the outset as a major component of the text’s frame of values, it also links the importance of otherness and race (Miss Vezzis is black), social hierarchization, the domestic sphere and the intimate to the figure of a border-crossing nanny.

- 4 The Massés welcome Louise with open arms and integrate her into the family, trusting her with the children, and relying on her to run the household in their absence. Yet, after vacations in Greece where boundaries become temporarily unstable and porous, the return to Paris is followed by a rapid degradation of their relationship that parallels Louise’s personal situation, both financially and psychologically. Both parents grow

increasingly tired of her initiatives and habits emanating from her precarious situation, and become less and less tolerant of her presence that is now considered to be invasive. Based on the evolution of the relationship, the continual process of domination and disempowerment to which Louise is subjected is conducted in different ways and with various degrees of consciousness throughout the narrative. At first, the couple is very self-conscious about the class-divide that separates them from their nanny, and tries not to signify this difference : “*Je ne voudrais pas qu’elle nous accuse un jour de l’exploiter*” says Paul in the beginning (CD 60-61). Since Louise is not considered to be a threat to the harmony and domestic ideals of the dwelling, the Massés exercise their power with patronizing and paternalistic undertones made visible by the many comparisons between her and the children, moments of reification and appropriation (“*Pascal, je te présente notre Louise*” (CD 63)), and offensive remarks based on the nanny’s supposed ignorance of their upper middle class codes and references (“Paul lui dit en souriant qu’elle a des airs de Mary Poppins. Il n’est pas sûr qu’elle ait saisi le compliment” (CD 35)). It is only when the instituted order is considered to be endangered that more vigorous confrontations arise.

- 5 Throughout the narrative, the changes in the atmosphere of the apartment are connected to the ordering of the domestic space. The apartment is at first described as being the smallest in the residence (CD 10), a locale of suffocation for both characters (CD 17). Myriam in particular feels trapped in a home where her ambitions in life, along with her sanity and happiness, are rapidly evaporating. The home is spatially transformed by the nanny’s arrival : Louise tidies up and rearranges the rooms, and the apartment becomes brighter and bigger, a worry-free and free-flowing space transformed into a playground when the parents are at work, and where all the family members circulate, interact and blossom. The ideas of mobility and liberation dominate these pages dedicated to the nanny’s reimagination of the home, as the Massés can focus on their careers and gratefully relinquish their power to Louise who takes over the domestic space : the apartment is “tout entier sous son joug” (CD 36). However, as the relationship between the three adults deteriorates, the apartment becomes –Slimani playing on the idea of the Other “as a domestic invader” (SP 127)– an occupation zone in the eyes of the Massés. Louise has “construit patiemment son nid” and “elle semble maintenant impossible à déloger” (CD 177). To make sense of the ways in which both parents attempt to regain control, Sara Upstone’s suggestion of approaching the postcolonial interior as a layered space, which informs her concept of “post-space” applied to the house<sup>11</sup>, is fitting. Upstone’s argument is based on the idea that, in postcolonial fiction, “the scales constructed when judging political importance are inverted” (SP 139) : real power is displaced from larger (“the common national scale” to which spatial politics are often associated (SP 24)) to smaller and more personal structures, with these conceived as a “dynamic set of politicised locations” (SP 24). Upstone suggests that the postcolonial home is a tangible space of deconstruction that should not be engaged as a complete structure but rather as a detotalised entity where the most private individual rooms in which outsiders are not typically welcome constitute “the minuscule spaces where resistance is ultimately and most securely held” (SP 139). In *Chanson douce*, two key scenes unfolding in two different private spaces, the bathroom and the kitchen, illustrate the household’s shifting power dynamics.
- 6 The turning point in the unraveling of the relationship happens when Paul comes home early from work to find Louise applying make-up on Mila, which triggers a

disproportionate fit of rage. This scene takes place in the bathroom, the epicenter of the family's intimacy, that is presented several times in the narrative as a site of resistance. Louise's own bathroom is broken and<sup>12</sup>, after undressing in the couple's bedroom, she takes her shower in the Massé's apartment every day in their absence. She walks naked around the apartment and engineers a brief moment of social upward mobility by transgressing the professional and social rules as she appropriates the space's most intimate areas, "une intimité à laquelle elle n'a jamais eu droit" (CD 159). The appropriation of the oppressive structure is thus not only accomplished through domestic work. It is also attempted through the emulation of her employers' lifestyle and a passivity that becomes resistance in the most private parts of the private space<sup>13</sup>. Usually taking place *in absentia*, Louise's resistance is now confrontational as, standing "à l'entrée de la salle de bains" (CD 106-07), she withstands the storm without submitting: "La nounou écoute Paul. Elle ne baisse pas les yeux, elle ne s'excuse pas" (CD 107). The threshold represents her place in the household that in turn echoes her place in society, but also the idea of *franchir le pas* on two levels: her insolence is out of line according to Paul who anxiously wants to reestablish boundaries (and protect his home as much as his daughter from being stained by "une telle vulgarité" (CD 106)), and Louise will end up taking a much more dramatic step in an outburst of violence that will cost the children their lives in the very same bathroom<sup>14</sup>.

- 7 In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock reflects upon the dialectic between the racialization of domestic space and the domestication of colonial space<sup>15</sup>. She demonstrates how rituals of domesticity aimed at controlling colonized people who were "inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men" (IL 35), and how domestic colonialism shaped British middle- and upper-middle class identity. In the Victorian urban metropolis, according to McClintock, "some of the formative ambiguities of gender and class were managed and policed by the discourses on race" (IL 77) in which white working-class women were figured as "embodying a regression to an earlier moment of racial development" (IL 112). McClintock's account of the historical narrative of race, domesticity and empire revolves in part around the political subjection of the figure of the nanny and thus provides great insight into the relation between Louise and the Massés turned "Massas". Indeed, when activating the postcolonial prism proposed by Slimani early on through the initial effect created by the narrative's opening chapters (as discussed above), the pivotal bathroom scene seems to rely on literary tropes reminiscent of postcolonial representations of the power struggles induced by the master-slave relationship. It is important to note that Paul's attitude inside the walls is presented as being quite different from his public behavior. He has "toujours tutoyé son boss. Il n'a jamais donné d'ordres" (CD 195), but becomes authoritative within the domestic space: "Louise a fait de lui un patron" (CD 195). The young father has decided to fire the nanny as a result of the incident, since her contestation of the acceptable behaviors dictated by a social imbalance in power is perceived to be a form of rebellion and therefore a threat that needs to be neutralized. Knowing that Paul insists, to justify his reaction and decision, on "la façon dont Louise l'avait regardé, son silence glaçant, sa morgue" (CD 123), this scene seems to gesture towards the importance granted to the economy of the gaze in master-slave relationships. This further establishes Louise's subaltern status and the nature of the interpersonal relationships unfolding in the apartment. Among other possibilities<sup>16</sup>, the standoff and ensuing demonization of Louise invokes Ferdinand Oyono's classic, anticolonial novel *Une vie de boy*<sup>17</sup>. Everywhere in the imaginary city of Dangan and more particularly within the home of the white settlers,

where spatialized hierarchies act for the commandant and his wife as both a microcosm and a metaphor for the colonial enterprise,

the relationship of power between colonizer and colonized is largely effectuated through eye communication. This is to say that the white bosses exert a kind of visual dominance by employing an intimidating stare, whereas the locals manifest their second-class status by either lowering their eyes or glancing away.<sup>18</sup>

- 8 In *Une vie de boy*, it is also in the bathroom and through a “reversal of the look” that Toundi’s initial contestation of the power dynamics instituted by the French commandant materializes<sup>19</sup>. The subversive gaze of the boy, who refuses to look away and dares to stare at his master’s nudity, constitutes a turning point as Toundi feels empowered and begins rejecting his subaltern status through indirect resistance, an attitude that prompts a drastic change in the household’s atmosphere and precipitates his fall. The question of intertextuality is always a delicate one when the references are not clearly identified, and one cannot affirm with certainty that the bathroom scene was imagined as a postcolonial echo of *Une vie de boy*. However, Oyono’s text, arguably the most famous literary representations of the master-slave relationship in Francophone West African literature, will likely occur to any critic working within the field of postcolonial studies. The importance of this connection should not be underestimated : it contributes to confirming the idea that Leïla Slimani invites the (implied) reader to think about the employers’ domination over their employee, exercised through remarks or gestures signifying an unbridgeable social divide, not only in terms of class superiority but also in its intersectionality with the idea of racial hierarchy<sup>20</sup>.
- 9 The second crucial incident takes place in the kitchen, a privileged site of resistance in postcolonial fiction, and involves both parents on this occasion. A complete gendered analysis of the division of space and the reassertion of power cannot be developed here, but it is important to highlight the fact that Myriam was not present in the bathroom scene, an absence that not only strengthens the patriarchal undertones of the incident but also emphasizes the young woman’s non-confrontational attitude. Unlike her husband, she indeed appears conflicted at times and able to question the process of subjection occurring in the apartment. The bathroom incident prompts her, for instance, to blame Paul for having been “trop dur, de s’être montré vexant” (CD 123), a reproach that is perceived by the latter as an act of female solidarity engineered by “deux ourses [qui,] [q]uand il s’agit des enfants [...] le traitent parfois avec une hauteur qui le hérisse [...] jouent de leur connivence de mères [...] l’infantilisent” (CD 123). However, this semblance of connection based on shared experiences relating to the women’s gender and minority status remains, despite Paul’s impressions, at best tenuous. Myriam alludes to this idea – which is never fully articulated and only occurs a couple of times in the narrative– when she finds herself in a vulnerable situation, such as the moments spent in the company of her aggressive mother-in-law with whom any type of complicity “de mère à mère, de femme à femme” is impossible (CD 132). Abandoned by her husband who refuses to side against his mother, Myriam is left imagining that the nanny would support her : “*Louise, elle, me comprendrait, ne cesse-t-elle de se répéter*” (CD 134). Unsurprisingly, the moment of “weakness” to which this last quote refers happens while the couple is away visiting Paul’s parents. When at home and empowered, Myriam struggles to see the nanny as anything more than a working body at her disposition<sup>21</sup>, and her actions contribute significantly to marking Louise’s difference and marginal status. Going back to the kitchen, Myriam, who defies traditional gender roles by refusing to sacrifice her career to

raise a second child (against her husband's will and despite the disapproval of her otherwise very free-spirited mother-in-law), is not associated to this space from which she is evicted :

[Louise] sort une casserole qu'elle met sur le feu. Démunie, Myriam la regarde s'agiter. Elle essaie de la raisonner. "Je vais le faire, je vous assure." Elle tente de lui prendre la casserole des mains mais Louise tient le manche serré dans sa paume. Avec douceur, elle repousse Myriam. "Reposez-vous, dit-elle. Vous devez être fatiguée. Profitez de vos enfants, je vais leur préparer à dîner. Vous ne me verrez même pas." (CD 58-59)

- 10 The kitchen becomes Louise's territory, she cooks for the family and friends who praise her at each dinner party, and also withdraws there to escape the public and dominant spaces of the domestic structure where social hierarchies are more reinforced. Delicious food and sparkling appliances become synonymous with the happy household run by the nanny. Yet, after the change of atmosphere following the bathroom incident described above, reclaiming the kitchen becomes a priority. It is in this room that Paul and Myriam confront Louise regarding her financial issues, the couple having received a letter from the *Trésor Public* instructing them to deduct money from their employee's monthly check. The scene is one of intense humiliation for Louise who appears entirely powerless in front of the couple and society at large, as in this very moment the Massés act as the State's intermediaries : they are those officially entitled to decide, give orders and injunctions, and punish on behalf of the establishment. Shortly after, it is still in the kitchen that the confrontation escalades. Convinced "qu'il faut s'émanciper du pouvoir de Louise" (CD 162), the Massés had already started to reappropriate –or overwrite– the space by throwing away the multiple containers used by the nanny to store every last bit of leftovers. One day, Myriam comes home late to find at the center of the table the chicken carcass she had thrown away that morning. Louise had retrieved the carcass, fed it to the kids and then thoroughly cleaned it before leaving it there "comme une vengeance, comme un totem maléfique" (CD 164). Following the incident, it is when she sees Louise drinking her coffee in the kitchen –by the window that symbolically connects to the outside, reinforcing the kitchen's metonymic dimension– that Myriam wishes she could "la faire disparaître de sa vie, sans effort, d'un simple geste, d'un clignement d'œil" (CD 173). The two women will no longer have their tea together in the kitchen and cannot share the same space, they will be "de plus en plus rarement ensemble dans la même pièce et exécutent une savante chorégraphie de l'évitement" (CD 184). It is finally not a surprise that the murder weapon happens to be a kitchen knife.
- 11 Reactivating the postcolonial lens, I suggest that the reordering of the kitchen does not only posit the domestic sphere as bounded territory where the private process of (dis)empowerment can be approached from a spatial perspective linked to the rooms' different attributes. It also confirms, following the confrontation in the bathroom, the type of subjection arising in the apartment. The emphasis put on Louise's "strange" habits during the Massés' symbolic reappropriation of the fridge, which functions as a metonym for the kitchen and the home as a whole, is crucial. The absolute refusal to throw away food is considered to be a whim at first both ridiculous and touching, but then abject and problematic as it becomes proof of a perceived rigidity and paranoia. This behavior is equated with disruptive chaos, and the way Louise "racle les boîtes de conserve, [et] fait lécher les pots de yaourt aux enfants" (CD 161), along with her habit of "collectionne[r] les bons de réduction qu'elle présente fièrement à Myriam" (CD 162) is depicted as a form of, to borrow Anne McClintock's terms, domestic degeneracy and barbarism functioning as

a marker of racial difference (*IL* 53). The intimate interdependence of race and class is here again stressed as her deviant compulsions originating from her lower-class status make her a contemporary avatar of colonial times “white negroes” in need of domestication/civilization. The racial component of the subaltern character, “la nounou blanche” (*CD* 199), is indeed stressed throughout the text, and comparisons with postcolonial minority groups abound, facilitated by a professional occupation that is presented as mostly performed by women of Maghrebi or Sub-Saharan origin. As her deceased husband used to say, highlighting once again the ideological climate that defines the narrative’s context, “*Il n’y a plus que les négresses pour faire un travail pareil*” (*CD* 98). And it is finally in relation to the private lived space that the idea of differentiation and *déclassement* is conveyed. Even a remote, dark and moldy studio deprived of basic amenities becomes inaccessible for the *nounou blanche* living “*comme les Roms*” (*CD* 193) who is about to be evicted and forced to “*chie[r] dans la rue, comme un animal*” (*CD* 153) by a deceived landlord –“*louer à une Blanche dans ce quartier, c’est quasiment inespéré*” (*CD* 152)<sup>22</sup>. It is in fact the quotidian of a *petite Blanche*, rather than *une Blanche*, that *Chanson douce* recounts<sup>23</sup>.

- 12 Omnipresent in political and media discourses relating to France’s economic struggle (post-2008 in particular in the context of the global financial crash) and/or identity crisis<sup>24</sup>, the *petit Blanc* has become a major figure in the French discursive and cultural landscape. Yet, despite occupying an ever-apparent place in the collective imaginary, the discursive construction of this “Blanc pauvre prenant conscience de sa couleur dans un contexte de métissage et se découvrant aussi misérable que les minorités tenues pour être, a priori, moins bien traitées que lui” remains obscure and in need of theorization<sup>25</sup>. More than a reflection on the figure itself (although it is worth noting that Slimani offers a representation that departs from the stereotypical image of the rural and reactionary *petit Blanc* often propagated in recent literature)<sup>26</sup>, it is one of its “functions” in French society to which *Chanson douce* draws attention. Peeking through the keyhole into the interior of a Parisian apartment and its hidden domesticity –as a space and a social relation to power (*IL* 34)–, Leïla Slimani envisions the postcolonial (re)politicisation of a French home to expose a remarkable example of domestic racialization involving another kind of native Other. Louise’s othering, as part of a process of hierarchization affecting the majority racial group, highlights how the histories of colonialism continue to pervade and structure the world of whiteness even behind its closed doors, where the practice of everyday life comes with “its own internal politics” and engenders specific social behaviors while functioning dialectically with the outside (*SP* 119). Slimani’s text, then, does more than shed light on elusive traces of colonial heritage or accentuate the fact that literary texts such as “crossover narratives”<sup>27</sup> –starting with those granting significant importance to alternative spatialities such as the domestic space and its “centrality for lived experience” (*SP* 115)– should be part of a reflection on the shifting articulation of Frenchness. As a novel mapping out the modalities that underpin the adaptive recontextualization of colonial discourse around the character of a white nanny, *Chanson douce* also confirms that a postcolonial perspective is indeed indispensable for understanding the multi-faceted “everyday forms of whiteness”<sup>28</sup>, all the while stressing the need for greater consideration of whiteness in the realm of Francophone postcolonial studies.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “The figure of the house, and domestic space in general, merit close attention in connection with the everyday” (Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life : Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 363). In his account of Roland Barthes’ engagement with the quotidian, Sheringham dedicates several pages to *Comment vivre ensemble*, a text based on the first course given by Barthes at the Collège de France that includes the apartment building as one of the spaces investigated (*Ibid.*, p. 201-07).
- <sup>2</sup> Sheringham does not broach postcolonial-related subjects and the group of thinkers studied –Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and Georges Perec–, does not include Frantz Fanon for instance and his foundational work on the racialized metropolitan ordinary.
- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the place of the postcolonial within the spatial turn, see Sara Upstone’s introduction in *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, p. 2-24 ; henceforth *SP*. The domestic space is part of many analyses dealing with Francophone literature, but rarely at the center of them. Among the few exceptions, Mildred Mortimer dedicates a chapter to it in her book *Writing from the Hearth : Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women’s Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean*, Lanham (MD), Lexington Books, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> See Lydie Moudileno’s call to reflect upon the potential postcoloniality of the French regions, away from Paris and the *banlieues* and the tendency to establish their specificities as norms (“The postcolonial provinces”, *Francosphères*, Vol. 1 n° 1, 2012, p. 53-68). Although the story of *Chanson douce* is set in Paris, its emphasis on the domestic makes it an interesting contribution to the rethinking of the French postcolonial space. See also James Procter, “The Postcolonial Everyday”, *New Formations : A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, n° 58, 2006, p. 62-80.
- <sup>5</sup> Leïla Slimani, *Chanson douce*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016 ; henceforth *CD*.
- <sup>6</sup> Titled, respectively, *Lullaby* (trans. Sam Taylor, London, Faber & Faber, 2018) and *The Perfect Nanny* (trans. Sam Taylor, New York, Penguin Books, 2018).
- <sup>7</sup> Leïla Slimani, *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> A key scene, early in the narrative, places the idea of latent racism at the center of the story’s ideological setting : Myriam first intends to rely on professional services to find a nanny but is confronted by the manager’s prejudice (*CD* 24-26), an attitude that forces the young mother to run away and to conduct the search herself. This racist incident is therefore also key when it comes to the structuration of the plot since it leads to Louise’s hiring.
- <sup>9</sup> The sense of connection is reinforced by the fact that the story takes place in an apartment rather than a house, one unit of a larger whole.
- <sup>10</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills*, Calcutta, Thacker, Spink and Company, 1888. This early clue illustrates the complex way the postcolonial permeates the following pages : both obvious and hidden, inescapable and easily (dis)missed.
- <sup>11</sup> *Chanson douce* presents the domestic as a site of trauma and not of new productive perspectives, a characteristic that Upstone associates with postcolonial fiction and its rewriting, through the use of magical-realism, of the colonial myth of spatial order.
- <sup>12</sup> The shower is rotting and the stench invades the studio, penetrating Louise’s body : “[l]’odeur de la moisissure qui s’échappe de la cabine de douche l’obsède. Elle la sent jusque dans sa bouche” (*CD* 159). Thus, the shower and the studio as a whole evoke and embody “l’âme pourrissante de Louise” (*CD* 226).
- <sup>13</sup> This attitude is first displayed when her friend Wafa –a young illegal migrant from Morocco functioning as Myriam’s contraposition in the text–, visits her while the Massés are on vacation. Louise seizes the opportunity to claim the couch and rest in the middle of her workplace, “[Elle] étend les jambes et croise les pieds sur la table” (*CD* 142), in a moment of transgressive relaxation that takes Wafa by surprise : “elle se dit que son amie doit être ivre pour se comporter ainsi” (*CD* 142).
- <sup>14</sup> Louise had a previous breakdown and is shown as having been capable of violent acts in the past : when her daughter Stéphanie is expelled from school and reacts with indifference, Louise is overcome with rage and beats her as soon as they get home. The scene is described in detail and stresses Louise’s brutality. The exact part played by her psychological instability is left unanswered, the reader having to consider her acts as the result of a possible mental illness combined with the pressure of her precarious social position and the everyday humiliations she has to endure. In other words, the abuse of power imposed on her by the Massés (which is the tactic adopted by the lawyer during the trial and very briefly alluded to (*CD* 84)) is, although at the core of the narrative, one of several factors associated to Louise’s killing spree.
- <sup>15</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather : Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, New York, Routledge, 1994 ; henceforth *IL*.
- <sup>16</sup> Within the French repertoire, intertextual references include Jean Genet’s play *Les Bonnes* (1947). Beyond the story itself, some details are reminiscent of Genet’s thoughts articulated in “Comment jouer les bonnes” (1963) : Louise’s impeccable appearance (“jolie, élégante dans son chemisier col Claudine” (*CD* 195)) echoes Genet’s description of his characters who are “fanées, mais avec élégance!” (8), an appearance that covers in both cases a

- “rotting” soul (“Nina Dorval a plongé les mains dans l’âme pourrissante de Louise” (CD 226) ; “Pourtant, il faudra bien que la pourriture apparaisse” (Genet, 8)).
- <sup>17</sup> Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy*, Paris, Julliard, 1956.
- <sup>18</sup> Damon Di Mauro, “Blowing Smoke and Shining Light in Oyono’s *Une vie de boy*”, *The French Review*, Vol. 78, n° 2, 2004, p. 328.
- <sup>19</sup> Levilson C. Reis, “Sartre’s and Oyono’s Black Orpheus : Returning (to the Question of) the Gaze in *Une vie de boy*”, *The French Review*, Vol. 85, n°4, 2012, p. 702-03.
- <sup>20</sup> The importance of the racial factor is confirmed by Slimani’s original plans regarding the nanny’s characterization, as the author “originally conceived of Louise’s character as an African woman” (Lauren Collins, “The Killer-Nanny Novel that Conquered France”, *The New Yorker*, 25 December 2017; URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/01/the-killer-nanny-novel-that-conquered-france>, consulté le 15 novembre 2019).
- <sup>21</sup> The same way as her husband does. Paul, while teaching Louise how to swim during their vacation in Greece (that is outside the apartment, Paris, and even France), humanizes the nanny for a split second after weeks of interactions, although her body remains desexualized : “Louise a un corps qui tremble sous les mains de Paul. Un corps qu’il n’avait ni vu ni même soupçonné, lui qui rangeait Louise dans le monde des enfants ou dans celui des employés” (CD 75).
- <sup>22</sup> This dire financial situation pushes Louise to beg one of the Massés’ neighbors for work : “*Je ne mendie pas. Je peux travailler, le soir ou tôt le matin. Quand les enfants dorment. Je peux faire le ménage, du repassage, tout ce que vous voudrez*” (CD 85).
- <sup>23</sup> Louise can barely sustain, in the public sphere, the comparison with marginalized minorities and even the *sans papiers* : she and her friend Wafa are swapping positions in the social hierarchy as Louise is spiraling down and accepting her fate, while Wafa’s future holds new opportunities and possibilities thanks to her *mariage blanc* that could lead to the regularization of her situation.
- <sup>24</sup> This focus has recently been bolstered by the 2016 American presidential elections and the staging of Donald Trump’s fusional relationship with rural white Americans (“hillbillies”, “rednecks” or “white trash”) which was heavily relayed by the French media. See Benoît Hopquin, “*Depuis l’élection de Trump, le petit Blanc a franchi l’Atlantique, à moins que ce ne soit le Rubicon*”, *Le Monde*, 27 February 2017; URL: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/02/27/petit-blanc\\_5086022\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/02/27/petit-blanc_5086022_3232.html), and Thomas Mahler, “*Pourquoi tout le monde parle des petits Blancs*”, *Le Point*, 17 November 2016; URL: [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/pourquoi-tout-le-monde-parle-des-petits-blancs-17-11-2016-2083772\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/pourquoi-tout-le-monde-parle-des-petits-blancs-17-11-2016-2083772_23.php), , consultés le 15 novembre 2019.
- <sup>25</sup> Aymeric Patricot, *Les petits Blancs. Un voyage dans la France d’en bas*, Paris, Plein Jour, 2013, p. 12. A few essays have initiated this theorization, among them see also the polemical essay by Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique : Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires*, Paris, Flammarion, 2014.
- <sup>26</sup> Including in Édouard Louis’ famous first novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (Paris, Seuil, 2014).
- <sup>27</sup> The term “crossover narratives” refers to fictions that are, according to James Procter and Bethan Benwell, “receptive to both professional/academic and everyday audiences” (*Reading across Worlds : Transnational Book Groups and Reception of Difference*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 11).
- <sup>28</sup> To borrow the title of Melanie E. L. Bush, *Everyday Forms of Whiteness : Understanding Race in a “Post-Racial” World*, Lanham (MD), Rowan & Littlefield, 2011.