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Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization

John S. LaRose

In the twentieth century, the weakening of the nation-state and of the community as viable structures serving to legitimize group and individual identity has often been and continues to be at the heart of many unsettling and often bloody conflicts. People everywhere feel themselves threatened with dispersal or assimilation, with the loss of their specificity as groups and as individuals. The forces that threaten the integrity of the self are perhaps at the root of the violence to be seen in the world today. French novelists of this century, beginning with Marcel Proust, have reflected this anxiety and violence in the instability and fragmentation of their narrative voices, in the ways in which traditional narrative forms are disrupted from within by a language which continually calls into question its own premises.

Proust's great novel could well be described as the exploration of a loss of identity brought about by the failure of traditional bastions of meaning, not the least of which was the threat to French national identity. World War I not only provides a central theme to Proust's novel, it gives it its structure. It was the advent of the War which caused the postponement of final publication, thus giving Proust the opportunity to expand and complicate his original framework of *temps perdu* and *temps retrouvé*, by continual revisions and embellishments. The end product remains a work in progress and implies what I will term a poetics of "recontextualization."¹

The war in Proust only serves to accelerate and aggravate a process already at work in French society since well before the time of the Revolution, and the comparisons of life in Paris in 1916 to the *Directoire* (in *Le Temps retrouvé*) bear this out: it is a city in which the *arrivistes* Madame Verdurin and Madame Bontemps reign as queens. The demise of the aristocracy is traced in the *Recherche* as the demise of the proper name, that is to say the demise of the name of the father. Identity as the legitimization of the self through the strict linearity of patriarchal descent has been displaced, has always already been displaced, from within, by what Derrida might call the inflation of the signifier.² What better example of this

inflation than the lavish Proustian text? Its abundance suggests the undefinable nature of the self in the incommensurable murmur of textual voices.

Proust's narrator suffers from an unresolved and unresolvable identity crisis. The very first pages of the novel demonstrate the fragility of consciousness and the difficulty it has cohering with itself. The hero's loss of consciousness of himself as self is induced in exemplary fashion by the acts of reading and dreaming:

Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: 'Je m'endors.' Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir encore dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire de réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatour, la rivalité de François I^{er} et de Charles Quint. (*Swann* 3)

A few pages later the narrator depicts his semi-conscious state as an inability to situate the physical space in which he lies. He describes himself dreaming of a girl, of the room in which he is sleeping, as emanations of the positions of his thigh or arms. Here the other, the physical space itself, is shown to be a construct of time and memory. It is the fragility of this construct, the elusiveness of memory, which gives his narrative its impetus. As Leo Bersani has put it, Proust's novel consists in a "massive—massively reiterated and illustrated—anxiety about an unidentifiable, perhaps unfindable particularity" (863).

The *Recherche* is a novel that is as much about forgetfulness as about memory. All the hero can remember about Combray he likens to "cette sorte de pan lumineux, découpé au milieu d'indistinctes ténèbres" (*Swann* 43). It is a frozen memory, one which screens as much as it reveals, thus distorting its object: "comme si Combray n'avait consisté qu'en deux étages reliés par un mince escalier et comme s'il n'y avait jamais été que sept heures du soir" (*Swann* 43). The novel grows out of the desire to illuminate the "indistinctes ténèbres," to restore the narrative of reality. It is a difficult, conscious effort, far removed from the involuntary memory's moment of "epiphany."

The narrator spends much time lamenting his inability to observe and understand the people and things around him. In Proust, the other is an enigma to be deciphered, but which continually frustrates all efforts to know. Interposed between the observer and the world is the mirror of language. The hero realizes this only in the final volume: "j'étais incapable de voir ce dont le désir n'avait pas été en moi par quelque lecture, ce dont je n'avais pas d'avance dessiné moi-même le croquis que je désirais ensuite confronter avec la réalité" (*Temps retrouvé* 25). Each time he does this, however, his sketch is revealed to be a fiction and the nature of reality remains forever hidden to him.

This inability to know, to fully define one's context becomes an inability to know oneself, and thus an inability to *be*. The narrator is the only character in the novel who is never specifically and explicitly named.³ Yet, the text spends much of its time meditating on the significance of names: names of people and of places. This helps explain the hero's fascination with the aristocracy, whose names signify both places and people.

The affective power of the name *Guermantes* can be traced back to the troubling projections of the *lanterne magique* placed in his childhood bedroom and with its "impalpables irisations, de surnaturelles apparitions multicolores, où des légendes étaient dépeintes comme dans un vitrail vaçillant et momentané (*Swann* 9), among which is Geneviève de Brabant, ancestor of the present day duke and duchess, whose name suggests the golden color of the castle and landscape to the young hero even before he sees them:

Certes je leur trouvais du charme à ces brillantes projections qui semblaient émaner d'un passé mérovingien et promenaient autour de moi des reflets d'histoire si anciens. Mais je ne peux dire quel malaise me causait pourtant cette intrusion du mystère et de la beauté dans une chambre que j'avais fini par remplir de mon moi au point de ne pas faire plus attention à elle qu'à lui-même. (*Swann* 10)

The hero's fascination with nobility and with the Merovingian past, that vague and shadowy background to French national history, is based at least in part on an idealization of the aristocracy as embodying something essentially French. His desire is to possess the key to the mystery of what he wants to think of as the

innate charm and desirability of the Guermantes. This mystery is embodied, or so he thinks, in the quasi-magical power of the name. In some essence which embodies or distills. The climax of the novel coincides with the devaluation of this name, as the narrator discovers in *Le Temps retrouvé*, that the Duchess of Guermantes, once the beacon of elegance in the Faubourg Saint Germain, has become *démodée*.

The decline of the French nobility is extensively documented in his portrayals of Parisian salons, and in the rise to eminence of Mme de Verdurin, a simple *bourgeoise* whom we discover in *Le Temps retrouvé* to have made a fortuitous alliance which makes her the new Princess of Guermantes. The Verdurin's salon is cast as a sect, obeying a strict, if unspoken, code, with its rituals and its displays. Mme Verdurin is an accomplished *comédienne/metteur en scène* as she emits signs which serve as signals for her *fidèles*. As Deleuze puts it: "... the worldly sign takes the place of action and of thought. ... [the sign] anticipates action and thought, annuls thought as it does action, and declares itself sufficient" (11, my translation). The world of the salon is a world devoid of substance, an endless play of empty signifiers.

France, by the time of Proust, is a society in which the legitimacy of individual identity can no longer be guaranteed by the proper name. What Proust demonstrates is that this was always already the case, even with the Guermantes. The Guermantes are discovered to owe as much allegiance to Germany as to France (this fact is said to explain the Baron de Charlus's desire not to see Germany defeated in the First World War).

In *Le Temps retrouvé*, alliance, that is to say association, has displaced lineage as the organizing principle. Synchrony has displaced history (thus the difficulty many people have in reading Proust "for the plot") and an identity based on relation to the other must also displace an identity based on essence.

When identity is based on a relationship to an other, it becomes necessary to define that other; hence the narrator's efforts to exhaustively know others as the context for his own affirmation as self. As Bersani puts it: "The narrator insistently asks: how can I be? The question is generated by Marcel's shattering discovery—or at least suspicion—that *others are*" (863). The failure of this project of knowing can be seen in the inconsistencies and lacunae of the narrative itself.

Both on the level of the signifier and on the level of the signified, the text is much more fractured than it may appear to many. The hero himself is the fractured subject of an ongoing quest for unity: he describes himself as a young man in search of some *grande idée philosophique*, on which to base a novel, but this ideal forever eludes him. Proust's hero must continually come to terms with things that are not as they (once) may have appeared to be. This is both due to the inadequacies of his powers of observation, as when he mistakes the signature on a letter from Gilberte to be that of Albertine, and to the ever-changing nature of his social context.

The advent of the war in the text corresponds to one of the more noticeable gaps in the narration: an undefined period of several years which the narrator spends "loin de Paris dans une maison de santé," having completely renounced his desire to become a writer (*Temps retrouvé* 29). The narrator is now (suddenly) an old man who has been defeated, seemingly willing to spend the rest of his days in the sanatorium. It is, once again, the completely fortuitous events at the Princesse de Guermantes's *matinée*, the involuntary memory awakened by his stumbling on the uneven paving stones of their courtyard, a kind of *deus ex machina*, which enables the narrator to begin writing, by freeing him from the necessity of a telos.

What the narrator has learned, by the time he takes up the pen to write, is that he must abandon the quest for essences, for the definitive work of art, one which would embody some "great philosophical truth." His only real discovery is a law of chaos, of contradiction and vacillation. In this respect one of the work's original working titles, "Les Intermittences du cœur," is very telling. The intermittences referred to here, by Proust's own definition, are not merely the caprices which we normally associate with "affairs of the heart." Proust had in mind a much more specific physical affliction akin to what might be known today as heart "murmurs," the unpredictable ways in which the heart fails to beat in a constant or regular rhythm.

Our memories, and thus our knowledge of who we are, of where we have been and who we have known, is critically dependent on arbitrarily established initial conditions, one of which is the present of our remembering. Proust's hero discovers that the recurrence of physical sensation is capable of triggering memory,

but this effect is fundamentally a chance occurrence (*Swann* 43), and it is the ultimate chance occurrence, the unforeseeable event of our death which threatens any identity with annihilation, while at the same time seemingly fixes identity by closing the process of recontextualization.

This novel presents itself as autobiography, a kind of *Bildungsroman*, so that the death of the narrator is the moment towards which the text must inevitably point; yet this death is forever deferred by the circularity of the novel: the end of which corresponds to the moment when the narrator takes up the pen to begin writing. There is a Proustian logic in which writing is equivalent to a kind of death: "Cette idée de la mort s'installe définitivement en moi comme fait un amour" says the narrator (*Temps retrouvé* 349). Why is writing here so linked to the idea of death? The narrator fears, of course that he will not have enough time to finish his work. It is also perhaps only death which can put an end to the perpetual becoming of the work: "l'idée de mon œuvre était dans ma tête, toujours la même, en perpétuel devenir" (*Temps retrouvé* 347). This perpetual process of becoming is nothing more than what Rorty calls recontextualization.

A la recherche du temps perdu is a narrative governed by chance, and as such is emblematic of a general trend in twentieth-century thought of reconsideration and revaluation of complex or chaotic behavior in conscious and unconscious processes. What is put to the fore is its involuntary, mechanical or arbitrary functioning.

In this Proust may well have been ahead of his time, scientifically speaking. Researchers exploring the nature of the brain and human consciousness have come to conclude that, rather than being stored in some location of the brain, simply awaiting retrieval by consciousness, the relationship between memory and consciousness is much more dynamic. The human brain apparently does not store fixed memories. Rather, a healthy human mind continually reinvents memories.⁴ Since much of what we consider to be our "identity" is bound up in our own "personal" experiences and memories, it is clear then that "identification" is a contingent, ongoing process which only arbitrarily appears to be fixed.

At one point in his essay "Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-dualist Account of Interpretation," Richard Rorty urges us to "[t]hink of human minds as webs of beliefs and desires, of sentential

attitudes—webs which continually reweave themselves so as to accommodate new sentential attitudes....” He even goes so far as to suggest that “there is no self distinct from this self-reweaving web. All there is to the human self is just that web” (93). The metaphor of the web is appropriate for narration, which has long been associated with the act of weaving. Consciousness can thus be thought of as the ongoing rewriting of the self; or better, the act of writing itself. Identity is an unfinished text, artificially and arbitrarily fixed by the closure of the book, the finality of death.⁵

In another essay Rorty calls Proust and Nietzsche “ironists”, arguing that they:

are quite aware that what counts as resolution, perfection, and autonomy will always be a function of when one happens to die or to go mad. But this relativity does not entail futility. For there is no big secret which the ironist hopes to discover, and which he might die or decay before discovering. There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being redescribed. If he had been alive or sane longer, there would have been more material to be rearranged, and thus different redescriptions, but there would never have been the right description. For although the thoroughgoing ironist can use the notion of a “better description,” he has no criterion for the application of this term and so cannot use the notion of “the right description.” (Rorty, “Self Creation” 99)

Marcel Proust corresponds perfectly to Rorty’s description of the “thoroughgoing ironist:” his narrator’s ideas about people and places are continually subject to correction and reinterpretation. Although he is said to have announced with joy to his housekeeper the moment when he wrote the word “fin” on his manuscript, Proust himself actually continued revising, rewriting and rearranging little bits and pieces of his novel right up until the moment of his death; and, while “Marcel” attempts to identify himself through the repetition and construction of a narrative about his specific historical and cultural context, identity and contexts are ultimately shown to be unstable constructs continually woven out of the disparate shards of memory and language. Identity is always incomplete, requiring a supplement of narration, of writing. Being as well as meaning in this narrative is forever deferred, qualified, contingent and reversible. It is dependent on contexts

which themselves are forever changing. This is what Proust refers to in *Le Côté de Guermantes I* as "le kaleidoscope social."

Much of what we consider our identity is a response to inquiry, a set of questions and answers about our past and present conditions—a narrative. The answers may not be the same in every circumstance. Our story cannot fully be told. It is not only inexhaustible, but continually "self-modifying" (that is to say that it modifies itself, which is our "self" in the very act of telling that self). It is an act of self-creation. It is us writing our selves, a kind of fiction in which fiction becomes reality. Signs become beings or vice versa.⁶

Identity here is in a practical sense indistinguishable from narration, that is from the active functioning of language as it unceasingly constructs and deconstructs memory, consciousness or history. There can be no essence to identity; it can never be definitive when it is seen as a function of language. Nor can identity be grasped as a whole, complete and self-sufficient. The conscious narrative reconstruction of personal identity is never complete, never satisfactory. It always requires further development, more narration, more text. Hence the exponential growth of Proust's work. It's safe to say that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a novel that Proust worked on all his life. But Proust remains undaunted by the theoretical impossibilities of a definitive text. Indeed, Proust's narrator expresses an admiration for the "great unfinished works" of the nineteenth century in *La Prisonnière*. The novel remains much more fragmented and inconsistent than we like to admit.

The violence with which groups of people insist on defending their right to difference belies the anxiety that there may indeed be no difference.⁷ This crisis of no difference is the crisis of meaning itself. Language, as Saussure teaches us, is a system of differences without positive terms (166).

This problem also faces what we call literary "studies," which seek to differentiate themselves from the fictional texts and documents upon which it operates. Inquiry into the nature of identity is itself subject to the recontextualization which "research" engenders. Any inquiry into the meaning of being must quickly find itself confronted with the question of the meaning of meaning. It is inevitably the way we formulate the question which will determine the answers we find. Indeed, all we ever seem to be able to do

is continually reformulate the question according to the ever-changing contexts from which we approach it.

It is difficult, from our perspective, to understand the novelty of Proust's work. We are a generation which has been weaned on the billboard, the sound bite and the video clip. Proust's poetics become our poetics—a poetics of continual revision, what I have chosen to call "recontextualization."

John S. LaRose is a doctoral candidate in French at Louisiana State University.

Notes

¹ I take my cue from Rorty's use of the term.

² I am referring here to the beginning of *De la Grammatologie* where Derrida speaks of the proliferation of discourses about language, pointing out the paradoxical impoverishment of the term's meaning: "Cette inflation du signe «langage» est l'inflation du signe lui-même, l'inflation absolue, l'inflation elle-même" (15). The repetition in Derrida's text signals the vacuity of a language which can only resort to tautology.

³ Marcel Muller has commented on this by saying: "Avoir un nom, c'est être pour autrui cet objet qu'autrui est pour nous.... Si je n'ai pas de nom et qu'en revanche les villes et les êtres sont avant tout leur nom, c'est que le rapport que ce je entretient avec autrui n'est pas réciproque ... l'anonymat tendrait ... à consacrer la prééminence du Héros sur l'autre" (17). What I am arguing here would rather take the opposing position. The hero's lack of a name marks the preeminence of the world over him, his inability to distinguish self and other.

⁴ See Rosenfield.

⁵ And, as Walter Benjamin has taught us: "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death" (94).

⁶ It is this same being we allude to when we talk about the style of Marcel Proust. But an identity that is based in a certain style of language, in a certain manipulation of signs, say, in what you say or wear, in the letters you write, is far different from an identity based on an immutable, essential self. What this style shows is not the idiosyncrasies of some "individual" consciousness, but rather the melding of idiosyncrasy into the impersonal stream of unconscious mechanisms: mechanisms of condensation and displacement, of association and combination, of synchrony and diachrony in other words, of language.

⁷ Or an outdated concept of a people's inherent right to territory.

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STATES OF IDENTITY

*Limits and Possibilities
of Writing "French"*



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Special Issue
Paroles Gelées 15.2 1997

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA
French Department Graduate Students'
Second Interdisciplinary Conference*

STATES OF IDENTITY

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

SELECTED PROCEEDINGS FROM THE UCLA FRENCH
DEPARTMENT GRADUATE STUDENTS' SECOND ANNUAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE. APRIL 25-27, 1997

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
<i>Editors</i>	
Program for <i>States of Identity:</i> <i>Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"</i>	7
Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation	11
<i>Denis Hollier</i>	
In Response to Denis Hollier's "Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"	29
<i>Janet Bergstrom</i>	
The Metaphor of Translation	37
<i>Andrea Loselle</i>	
Marcel Mauss's National Internationalism: An Approach to the <i>Essai sur le don</i>	43
<i>Luke Bresky</i>	
Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France	55
<i>Susan Purdy</i>	
Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. <i>La Sylphide</i>	65
<i>Regina Fletcher Sadono</i>	
The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's <i>Le Silence de la cité</i>	75
<i>Lorie Sauble-Otto</i>	

Identity Crises: Positions of Self in Simone de Beauvoir's <i>Memoirs</i>	83
<i>Kimberly Carter-Cram</i>	
Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization	95
<i>John S. LaRose</i>	
Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé	105
<i>Melissa McKay</i>	
Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh	115
<i>Joseph S. Jenkins</i>	
The State of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot	129
<i>Benjamin Kolstad</i>	
Ordering Information	138
Call For Papers	139

Introduction

When we began preparations for the Second French Graduate Student Conference at UCLA, we learned very quickly that the concept of "being late" is a phenomenon that haunted not only the Romantics. To follow an original event of any kind is a challenging task, but the successful outcome of our conference *States of Identity: Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French,"* documented by the high quality of the present proceedings, demonstrate that there can be original "seconds," as paradoxical as this might sound.

Our "Call for Papers" for a conference on "identity" in the context of 'French' writing generated national and international responses from students in different disciplines such as Art History, ESL, Philosophy, Theater, as well as French, German and Comparative Literature thus underlining the interdisciplinary appeal of this conference.

Denis Hollier's thought-provoking keynote address on the very timely and controversial question of teaching literature in translation inaugurated the three-day event. Hollier's talk was complemented by insightful responses from Janet Bergstrom and Andrea Loselle from the perspective of film and poetry. We want to thank all three of them for setting the stage for an intellectually challenging yet collegial discussion among students, faculty and the many guests from outside the academic community.

Though the papers presented by the graduate students in six panels contributed much to our knowledge regarding individual aspects of "identity" in different cultures and time periods, the subsequent discussions made it clear that attempts to reach "sameness" regarding a given problem were inevitably deferred by new questions and concerns. What remained was the realization that in spite of the plurality of opinions, we had achieved "identity" in the overarching collective gesture of intellectual

exchange. It is this discovery that justifies this conference and our work in the humanities in general.

This conference and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the generous financial support from our sponsors and we want to thank the Borchard Foundation, the French Consulate at Los Angeles, the UCLA Graduate Student Association, the Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies and the Campus Programs Committee of the Program Activities Board. Last but not least, we want to express our gratitude to the UCLA French Department and its faculty, whose continued support, encouragement and presence during the panels was much appreciated by the graduate students. A special thank you is due to Jean-Claude Carron for his introduction of the keynote speaker and tireless personal *engagement* in the organization of this conference.

Our last acknowledgment goes to the graduate students of the French Department who contributed in many ways to the successful outcome of this event and sacrificed much precious time to meetings and other organizational tasks. We hope that the success of the first two conferences will serve as motivation and inspiration to those who are currently working on next year's conference, which we are all eagerly anticipating.

The Editors

Diane Duffrin

Markus Müller

States of Identity

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA French Department
Graduate Students' Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference,
April 25-27, 1997*

Friday, April 25, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM OF SUNSET VILLAGE COMMONS

4:45 p.m. Introduction of Keynote Speaker

Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA

5:00 p.m. Keynote Address

Denis Hollier, Yale University

"Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"

Respondents

Janet Bergstrom, UCLA

Andrea Loselle, UCLA

7:00 p.m. Reception

Saturday, April 26, 1997

NORTHRIDGE ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #1

Grafting Past to Present: Hybrid Identities

Moderator: Michael Stafford

1. "Norman French, Latin and Scots English: Three versions of the *Leges inter Brettos et Scottos*," *Kristen Over (UCLA, Comp. Literature Program)*
2. "Verlan: An Expression of Beur Identity or Reversal by Inverse," *Amy Wells (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*

3. "Marcel Mauss on Nationalism: An Approach to *The Gift*,"
Luke Bresky (UCLA, Dept. of English)

10:45 a.m. Panel #2

The Politics of Pedagogy: Translating Culture in the Classroom

Moderators: Natalie Muñoz, Marcella Munson

1. "Silent Words: Language as an Obstacle to Immigrant Integration and Identity in French Society," *Katharine Harrington (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*
2. "*The Guest* in the Classroom: The Voice of Camus in Multicultural Academic Discourse," *Ajanta Dutt (Rutgers University, ESL Program)*
3. "Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France,"
Susan Purdy (University of Western Ontario, Dept. of French)

2:30 p.m. Panel #3

Bodies in Writing: Feminine Identity and the Literary Text

Moderator: Heather Howard

1. "Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. *La Sylphide*," *Regina Fletcher Sadono (UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept.)*
2. "The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le silence de la cité*," *Lorie Sauble-Otto (University of Arizona, Dept. of French and Italian)*
3. "The 'I' Which Is Not One: Dual Identity in the Case of Simone de Beauvoir's Autobiography," *Kim Carter-Cram (Idaho State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages)*

4:15 p.m. Panel #4

War and Remembrance: National Epitaphs of Self

Moderator: Stacey Meeker

1. "Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization," *John S. LaRose (Louisiana State University, Dept. of French and Italian)*
2. "The Body and the State: Fantasies of Identity in Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*," *Leslie Ann Minot (UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comp. Literature)*
3. "Ecriture et Mémoire: Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Semprun's *L'écriture ou la vie*," *Marcus Keller (California State University Long Beach, Dept. for German, Russian and Romance Languages)*

Sunday, April 27, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #5

Lieux de Mémoire: Negotiating Boundaries of Francophone Identity

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé," *Melissa McKay (University of Georgia, Dept. of Romance Languages)*
2. "Personal and National Narrative in *Une vie de crabe* by Tanella Boni," *Laura K. Reeck (New York University, Dept. of French)*

10:45 a.m. Panel #6

Representation and the Reconsideration of Identity

Moderator: Diane Duffrin

1. "Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh," *Joseph Jenkins (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*
2. "The Stage of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot," *Ben Kolstad (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

Open Discussion

Closing Statement

Markus Müller, UCLA

