

“You can always hold out a piece of bread in the void”: Food and Duras’s War of
Waiting

Katherine Roseau and Arely Cuevas-Flores
Mercer University

In “La Douleur,” a first-person narrative that is the first of six texts in a collection of the same title about the Second World War and the months following German capitulation, Marguerite Duras writes: “On peut toujours tendre du pain dans le vide” (46) “You can always hold out a piece of bread in the void” (*The War* 34). Duras’s autobiographical protagonist, Marguerite, consumes nothing besides coffee and speed during her period of waiting for the possible return of her husband, Robert Antelme (Robert L.), from the concentration camp in April 1945. Duras writes her war: at once a collective experience—she situates herself within the group of countless women from every war of all time (48, 60)—and a deeply personal one that nobody, Duras writes, can understand (Kritzman 63, *La Douleur* 17). She writes of crowds celebrating and of being the only one waiting, self-sequestered in her apartment (*La Douleur* 37). She writes of her solidarity with other women waiting (47, 57) and of her work at Orsay train station (which received returning deportees and POWs) to collect information to print and notify families of those returning (20-21). In addition to her participation in the Resistance, her war is one of the unknown, as she waits for news of a loved one (48). Duras narrates these moments of anticipation at the time when photographs of concentration camps were for the first time widely circulated (Zelizer 92).

In “La Douleur,”¹ food is at the heart of an interplay of absence and presence, an interplay that reverberates throughout generations of testimony and literature about the Second World War. The absence of food is palpable in concentration camp testimony. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi recounts that food dominates prisoners’ dreams because of its absence during waking hours (61). A different response to lack of food appears in *In Memory’s Kitchen*, a compilation of traditional Czech recipes written by women in the Theresienstadt camp in Terezín. For these women, food is not just a reminder of their hunger, it also serves as a call back to childhood, memories, comfort, and celebrations. Although malnourished, these women sustained themselves with memories of food throughout their time in Theresienstadt. After the liberation of Dachau, Antelme quickly wrote his personal account of Nazi concentration camps in *L’Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*), which appeared in 1947. This article cites passages from Antelme’s text to compare his and Duras’s treatment of absence and bread. Other Duras texts explore absence and presence as well, although not necessarily

¹ *La Douleur* is translated as *The War* by Bray, but “douleur” literally means “pain.”

regarding food. In Alain Resnais and Duras's film *Hiroshima mon amour*, Elle faces trauma from the Second World War while in Hiroshima in 1957. This text will serve as a comparison to "La Douleur" later in this article. An extreme or violent absence of food continues to appear in writing by children and grandchildren of the Nazis' victims. For example, Georges Perec's father died as a soldier in the army, and his mother died after being deported, likely to Auschwitz (Wadhera 577, 580). Priya Wadhera argues that in Perec's 1969 novel *La Disparition* (translated as *A Void*), the lack of food represents loss of memory (578) and "is inextricably tied to death" (580). Lola Lafon's 2022 *Quand tu écouteras cette chanson* (*When You Listen to This Song: On Memory, Loss, and Writing*) which includes a citation of Duras on the subject of writing (15), provides a much more recent example. Lafon's great-aunts and great-uncles were murdered in the Holocaust (44). Lafon reflects on her anorexia, relating it to inherited trauma. For her, the void created by hunger proves that she can beat death (142-143).

Situated within this ongoing line of writing about absence, presence, and food, Duras's text shows a particular obsession with food during Robert L.'s absence and subsequent recovery. The author's fixation materializes in hallucinations and the desire to manifest food far away. Duras does not directly bear witness to the Nazi concentration camp as does Antelme in *L'Espèce humaine*. Despite the difference in the two perspectives, Colin Davis and Martin Crowley have demonstrated close intertextual relationship between the two narratives. Davis asserts that *La Douleur* has a "revisionary stance [...] toward Antelme's text" and that it is a "disturbing rereading" of Antelme's idea that the perpetrator cannot deprive the victim of his humanity (172) because they are unified in the human race (181). For Davis, *La Douleur* depicts an "erasure of ethics," based particularly on another text in the collection, "Albert des Capitales" ("Albert of the Capitals") in which Thérèse (Duras's double) tortures a collaborationist. For Crowley, however, *La Douleur* is an "extension" of *L'Espèce humaine*. Crowley argues that *La Douleur*—again, notably in the character Thérèse—depicts a shared humanity of victim and torturer, meaning that we all share a "tendency to violence" (185). Here, focusing on Marguerite in "La Douleur" rather than on Thérèse, we also show how Duras's text is in conversation with Antelme's on the question of humanity. Instead of examining ethics and the role of victim and torturer, this article explores the embodied connection created in the mind during separation—marked by food and its absence. *L'Espèce humaine* bears witness to hunger and humiliation in the concentration camp, while "La Douleur" shows the pain of missingness, defined as "the state of 'not knowing' the whereabouts of a loved one and holding concerns for the wellbeing of that person" (Kennedy et al. 1545). To cope with the unknown concerning her husband Robert L., Marguerite continues bonding with him. She brings him into her own body, making room for him by way of her own hunger. Then, after his return, she intimately beholds the sacredness of humanity as it is

threatened by the violence of starvation.

Much scholarship on Duras has focused on the “unspeakability” of trauma.² This article turns the focus elsewhere. Drawing on the psychology of grief and of missingness, we suggest that “*La Douleur*” is a text of the void, of embodied pain suffered by waiting at home. We read “*La Douleur*” closely for food, which—in its violent absence—has two functions: 1) as an obsession, it creates an imagined, one-sided bond between the one waiting and the one absent, which is especially prominent in the first part of the narrative, during Robert L.’s absence, and 2) as denied, it participates in the *thingification*³ of the starved, as seen in the second part of the narrative, upon Robert L.’s return.

The much-discussed preface

The much-discussed preface of “*La Douleur*” does not mention food, but it does point to sacrilege of that which is sacred for Duras (humanity), via extreme violence to the body through starvation. *La Douleur* was published in 1985. In the preface to this first text, Duras asserts that she found the manuscript decades after the war and that she has no recollection of writing it (12). Although merely one page, the preface has received much attention in scholarship. Prefaces function to set up the story that follows and attempt to convince readers that the author has the authority to tell it. As a life-writing text—in this case, supposedly a diary but perhaps more accurately a memoir—readers expect the author to convince them of its veracity (Kelly 49). For many scholars, the preface is key to questions of memory, truthfulness, and sincerity, and “Duras’s insistence on the truth-value” opens itself to skepticism (Willging 191). Annabel L. Kim does not veil her skepticism, shown by her choice of the words “*ostensibly* taken from wartime journals” and “*conveniently* unearthed” (136, our emphasis). Skepticism continues even though notebooks fitting the description in the preface were left to the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine (Imec) when Duras died in 1996 (Willging 191). These notebooks, which include a draft of *La Douleur*, were published as *Cahiers de la guerre* in 2006, then translated by Linda Coverdale and published in 2008 as *Wartime Notebooks* by MacLehose Press and, the same year, as *Wartime Writings* by The New Press. We will cite the latter for translations.

Others have argued that the preface introduces the main idea of “*La*

² Leslie Hill writes: “Duras in *La Douleur* is able to explore not so much the events of 1944 and 1945 in themselves, but, more pertinently in 1985, the question of the very possibility of representing those events in language” (126). Comfort argues that Duras communicates through her body “what words cannot” (552). Kritzman writes: “Paradoxically, [in *La Douleur*] language becomes a vehicle for that which cannot be articulated” (67). See also Caruth and Horowitz. For arguments challenging the idea of the unspeakable, see Trezise and Pederson.

³ We borrow Aimé Césaire’s concept of “thingification” (42-43), to which we return later in the article.

Douleur.” For Lawrence D. Kritzman, Duras uses the preface to present herself as historical witness and the text as testimony, which she sets outside of literature, as literature would not be “authentic” (64). Rosemarie Scullion suggests that the preface presents a non-dit of guilt that continues to be unsaid throughout the text, basing her claim on the idea that Duras’s words “comment ai-je pu abandonner ce texte” could really mean “how could I have abandoned this *man*” (155) instead of “this text.” And for Kim, the preface sets up an oscillation between “denial” and “ownership” that will return in the pivotal “shit scene” in which Marguerite helps Robert L. recover and in which the ambivalence becomes about the human and the inhuman (136-137, 141).

Rather than signaling amnesia or non-dits, we suggest that the preface uses a literary device to address the question of genre and to foreshadow the sacredness of humanity. The ideas of sacredness and humanity are present—not absent or found in the lacunae, as Scullion asserts regarding guilt. We will address the literary device and then the sacred.

Kim persuasively demonstrates that Duras uses the preface to confer her so-called journal with “documentary status as a found object” (136). As a rule, readers are suspicious of the veracity of life-writing texts. Yet, readers see diaries, written at the time of the reported events, as the genre that truly captures the emotion of the moment (Roseau 11), ignoring the mediation of memory inherent in all texts (Radstone 138). Readers see other life-writing genres, further removed in time, as subject to failure of memory. By writing, “J’ai retrouvé ce Journal dans deux cahiers des armoires bleues de Neauphle-le-Château” (12) “I found this diary in a couple of exercise books in the blue cupboards at Neauphle-le-Château” (3), Duras presents the texts as a “lost manuscript,” a trope that Debra Kelly identifies in the epitext (i.e., readers’ comments, publicity documents, and exhibition displays) of women’s life-writing texts of the same war (55). Readers are drawn to the powerful story of a life nearly forever forgotten and saved by the discovery (Kelly 56). The diary form of “La Douleur” gives credibility to the text, since the immediacy of journaling seems to result in a more reliable recording. Yet, it does not seem possible to the narrator—nor to readers—that Duras would have been able to write while worrying herself to near death. Duras continues: “Ce qui est sûr, évident, c’est que ce texte-là, il ne me semble pas pensable de l’avoir écrit pendant l’attente de Robert L.” (12) “One thing is certain: it is inconceivable to me that I could have written it while I was actually awaiting Robert L.’s return” (4).⁴ The preface addresses the genre problem without resolving it.⁵

⁴ Kathy Comfort importantly draws attention to a 1985 interview in which Duras “concedes that ‘j’ai dû commencer à écrire *La Douleur* quand on est allés dans ces maisons de repos pour déportés, c’est-à-dire plusieurs mois après le retour de Robert Antelme’ (1985, p. 37)” (Comfort 522).

⁵ Lucie Aubrac, French resister, also employed the structure of a diary in her autobiographical text written in the 1980s. Aubrac, however, immediately reveals this to readers in her foreword (10).

In the same one-page preface, Duras tells readers: “*La douleur* est une des choses les plus importantes de ma vie” (12) “*The War* is one of the most important things in my life” (4). Duras thus warns readers of the sacredness of the text, as she does even more directly in the preface to “Albert des Capitales” and “Ter le milicien,” (“Ter of the Militia”) two other texts in *La Douleur*: “Apprenez à lire : ce sont des textes sacrés” (138) “Learn to read [the texts] properly: they are sacred” (115). Duras does not use the word “sacred” in the preface to “La Douleur.” However, sacredness is already associated with the diary genre and even more so with the “lost manuscript.” Readers project this status onto diaries (Kelly 55). The sacred that follows the preface is nothing less than humanity—or more specifically “irreducible humanity” (Crowley 184)—and the solidarity that saves us. With food, specifically bread, we will analyze the theme of solidarity as communion, which Erin Tremblay Ponnou-Delaffon identified in Antelme’s text (41).

Food in her hand, nothing in either body

While diagnosing Duras the author or Marguerite the protagonist is not the goal here, drawing on psychology to read “La Douleur” sheds light on the author’s use of food and void and on the condition of waiting at home. Missingness seems particularly appropriate to Marguerite’s situation. Studies in grief also explain Marguerite’s intense bond with Robert L. People suffering from missingness experience depression, grief, and most notably anxiety, which manifests in panic attacks, psychosomatic symptoms, and “intrusive thoughts of distressing outcomes” (Kennedy et al. 1556). Common coping mechanisms include seeking support, searching for the missing, and continuing a bond (1557-8). By continuing a bond, which is of particular interest here, “the psychological presence of the missing loved one [is] preserved” by, for example, wearing the other’s clothing (1560).

In line with studies on missingness and grief, Marguerite experiences anxiety and derealization with psychosomatic symptoms. Derealization or “ontological confusion” can arise from a continued bond (Fuchs 53) and can pull the bereaved into an in-between temporal state (43). In Marguerite’s case, we see an ambiguity not so much of time (present and past) but of space, of the concentration camp and Paris.⁶ Marguerite also suffers from a fever, rarely bathes, spirals out of control, deprives herself of food, screams wildly, and falls to the floor. She barely sleeps at night, falling asleep during the day in the middle of conversations. D., her lover Dionys Mascolo, scolds her by saying, “Regardez-vous, vous ne ressemblez plus à rien” (33). Barbara Bray translates this as “Look at yourself—you look like nothing on earth” (22), but literally, the last part means

⁶ See Willging and Comfort for an analysis of place in *La Douleur*.

“you no longer look like anything” or “you look like nothing.” Marguerite loses herself in body and mind, not only because of her extreme weight loss, but also because missingness reduces her to nothing, consumed by the unknown. Marguerite also responds to missingness with a destruction of the self which, as Comfort points out, becomes quite literal and embodied (555).

Through her concept of postmemory, Mariane Hirsch explains that survivors’ children “*adopt* the traumatic experiences of others as experiences [they] *might [themselves] have lived through*” producing a felt sense of having been present (*The Generation of Postmemory* 35, emphasis in original). Although Hirsch focuses on intergenerational transmission of trauma, her theory is applicable to “La Douleur.” Marguerite is separated from Robert L. not by generational distance, but by location. In this way, “La Douleur” depicts a vicarious suffering contemporaneous to the event. Hirsch’s theory illustrates the traversing of the self-other boundary and draws attention to “the porousness and plasticity” of this boundary (“Neuroscience”). Kim similarly explores the crossing of boundaries defined not by generational difference but by body and experience of self and other (135, 148). “La Douleur” thus offers an understanding of the war as experienced by those waiting for the return of the loved one, or for the news that they have died. Duras depicts the porousness of the self-other boundary and therefore trauma suffered by a spouse while waiting. Marguerite puts herself in Robert L.’s position and suffers an endless oscillation between hope and certainty that he is dead, mentally joining her body to his starved body (*La Douleur* 20).

The photographs of the Nazi concentration camps that flood the world in 1945 perhaps aid Marguerite’s morbid projection (*Cahiers* 175) as she allows public images of a collective atrocity to fill in the blanks of her intimate suffering, a mixing of public (or collective) and private that also defines postmemory (*The Generation of Postmemory* 35). Duras expresses that her suffering is unique: “Personne n’a rien de commun avec moi” (“La Douleur” 17) “No one has anything in common with me” (8). Paradoxically, though, the suffering that isolates her from the world also initiates her into the collective experience of “une attente de tous les temps, de celle des femmes de tous les temps, de tous les lieux du monde” (“La Douleur” 60) “a suspense as old as time, that of women always, everywhere” (46). In her own time, it is an experience shared by her contemporaries. In the earlier draft, she writes: “Depuis qu’Eisenhower s’est trouvé mal à Buchenwald, trois millions de femmes se foutent comme moi de l’issue de la guerre” (*Cahiers* 171) “Ever since Eisenhower was sickened by Buchenwald, three million women and I don’t give a fuck how the war turns out” (*Wartime* 104-5).

Indeed, for those who were waiting for the return of a deported loved one, April 1945 was an intense month. The liberation of camps on the eastern front began nine months before: Majdanek in July 1944 and Auschwitz and Birkenau in January 1945. However, these camps were liberated by the Red Army and for many

reasons global shock did not yet occur, Barbie Zelizer explains. The Soviet press published little before spring 1945. In the West, newspaper editors called for corroboration and when they did print Soviet reports, they did so with caution—putting them entirely in quotes or tempering them. Editors, like their readers, were unwilling to believe the extent of mass killing. The few photographs that circulated did not show piles of naked corpses like the photographs that came later (Zelizer 49-64). It was not until April 1945, when British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen and US troops liberated Buchenwald and Dachau, that atrocity photos began to circulate widely. At General Dwight Eisenhower's behest, "photographers and reporters within a one-hundred-mile radius" traveled to Ohrdruf, a subcamp of Buchenwald, to cover the horror (64). Zelizer writes: "over an approximately three-week period between April 9 and the end of the first week of May, the U.S. and British [and, we posit, French] publics were exposed to an explicit and ongoing photographic display that visually documented the atrocities" (92). While the world was not previously completely ignorant of atrocity and genocide, the inundating images of emaciated and dead bodies in April 1945 signaled a stark shift and became the backdrop for Duras's writing.

More than one of Duras's protagonists confuses her body with a dead lover's body. *Hiroshima mon amour*, set in the title city in 1957, is also a story of love and pain that is replayed through Elle (a French woman) and Lui (her Japanese lover). Elle talks about the moment in 1944 when she found her dying German lover, whose body she covered with her own. Elle declares that before his death they had become one body. "Je ne pouvais plus voir entre son corps et le mien qu'une similitude hurlante. / Son corps était devenu le mien, je n'arrivais plus à l'en discerner" (132, 1:00:12) "I could no longer see anything but a howling resemblance. / His body had become mine, I was no longer able to differentiate." In the first part of "La Douleur," Marguerite begins to resemble Robert L. as she imagines him to be. She deprives herself of food and becomes frail. Marguerite sees a "howling resemblance" with Robert L., as Elle saw with her German. When Robert L. returns and Marguerite beholds his skeletal body, it is clear that the physical resemblance was more "howling" in her imagined bond with her husband than it was in reality. In the minds of both protagonists, however, an intimacy of lovers or spouses continues in death, physically in Elle's case, and mentally in Marguerite's. Duras writes: "Je m'endors près de lui tous les soirs, dans le fossé noir, près de lui mort" (20) "I fall asleep beside him every night, in the black ditch, beside him as he lies dead" (10).

Marguerite cannot touch Robert L., as Elle touches her German companion during the confusion of their bodies. Nevertheless, Duras is explicit about the fleshly connection between Marguerite and Robert L. despite the physical separation (*La Douleur* 47). This reflects a form of coping through the continuation of the bond. Thomas Fuchs suggests that continuing a bond can be healthy, a way

to move past the ambiguity of absence/presence because the bereaved incorporates to some degree the other instead of searching for them on the outside (57). Cecilia Kennedy et al. cite some manifestations of continuing a bond, such as wearing the clothes of the deceased or surrounding oneself with the person's photographs (1561). Lucie Aubrac's pseudo-diary provides a comparison to Duras's text. Aubrac writes that, during the absence of her husband, who had been arrested by the Gestapo, she regularly engaged in pillow talk with his pajamas (173). In "La Douleur," however, the continued bond is more embodied. She does not embody Robert L.'s mannerisms or spirit, but rather his death. Duras writes: "Sa mort est en moi. Elle bat à mes tempes" (15) "His death is in me, beating in my head" (6). Perhaps Marguerite resorts to this cadaverous bond because she can only imagine him dead or dying. Their bodies and therefore their existences are linked, and so when Marguerite suffers from dissociation (when "je" becomes "elle"), she loses reality and doubts both of their existences (50).

Marguerite's identification with Robert L. further manifests through her self-deprivation. Comfort classifies the symptom of not eating as loss of appetite (558). It is also a willful self-deprivation. Duras writes: "S'il revient je mangerai avec lui. Avant, non" (59) "If he comes back, I'll eat with him. Before, no" (46). Despite the continuing food shortage and the requirement of ration tickets, there is food in Paris, and it even abounds for those who can pay black market prices. Marguerite leans her head against the window and notices a crowded restaurant below:

En bas le Saint-Benoit, c'est plein, une ruche. Il y a un menu clandestin pour ceux qui peuvent payer. Ce n'est pas ordinaire d'attendre ainsi. [...] Je sais seulement qu'il a eu faim pendant ces mois et qu'il n'a pas revu un morceau de pain avant de mourir, même pas une seule fois (37).

Down below is the Saint-Benoît restaurant, full up, a hive of activity. They've got a secret menu for those who can pay. It's not normal to wait like this. [...] All I know is that he was hungry for months and didn't see another scrap of bread until he died, not even once (26).

The juxtaposition of the extremes "full" and "hive of activity" on one hand, and "[not] another scrap" and "not even once" on the other shows the barely hyperbolized hunger that Marguerite knows camp inmates suffer (*La Douleur* 175).

Still waiting while others celebrate the end of the war, Marguerite feels isolated. Duras explains: "Le restaurant est plein. Les gens parlent de la fin de la guerre. Je n'ai pas faim. Tout le monde parle des atrocités allemandes. Je n'ai plus jamais faim. Je suis écœurée de ce que mangent les autres" (59) "The restaurant is full. People are talking about the end of the war. I'm not hungry. Everyone's talking

about German atrocities. I'm never hungry now. I'm nauseated by other people eating" (45). For the others, words of death come out of their mouths and food goes in. Marguerite takes nothing in and not only speaks death but feels ready to hurl it, which she will later do—not as vomit but as a scream.

Elsewhere in the text, Marguerite prepares potatoes and buys bread. While the potatoes cook, she rests her head on the table and sees Robert L. in the ditch, "[les] mains [...] ouvertes" (19) "His hands [...] open" (10). Marguerite denies herself the potatoes and the bread. She desires the void for the all-consuming pain, "le supplice" (19) "suffer[ing]" (10). She has so little control, but she decides that it is her choice to let the pain consume her, unto death.

Bread, synonymous with basic sustenance, appears twice more during Marguerite's wait for Robert L. About standing outside a bakery, she writes: "il faudrait peut-être acheter du pain, ne pas laisser perdre les tickets" (36) "maybe I should buy some bread, so as not to waste the coupons [ration tickets]" (25). We do not know, however, if Marguerite follows through. In another instance, she does buy bread but becomes nauseated the moment she gets home with it (44). The bread reappears a few pages later. The presence of this bread in Marguerite's hand makes the absence of bread in Robert L.'s hand more palpable. Duras writes:

Fusillé en cours de route. Mort le ventre vide. Sa faim tourne dans la tête pareille à un vautour. Impossible de rien lui donner. On peut toujours tendre du pain dans le vide. On ne sait même pas s'il a encore besoin de pain. On achète du miel, du sucre, des pâtes. On se dit : s'il est mort, je brûlerai tout. Rien ne peut diminuer la brûlure que fait sa faim. On meurt d'un cancer, d'un accident d'automobile, de faim, non, on ne meurt pas de faim, on est achevé avant. Ce que la faim a fait est parachevé par une balle dans le cœur. Je voudrais pouvoir lui donner ma vie. Je ne peux pas lui donner un morceau de pain (46).

Shot in transit. Dead with an empty stomach. His hunger wheels around in your head like a vulture. You can't give him anything. You can always hold out a piece of bread in the void. You don't even know if he still has need of bread. You buy honey, sugar, pasta. You say to yourself, If he's dead I'll burn the lot. Nothing can help the way his hunger burns you. People die of cancer, of car accidents, but no, they don't die of hunger, they're finished off first. What hunger has wrought is completed by a bullet in the heart. I'd like to give him my life. I can't even give him a bit of bread (34).

In this passage, Duras's reaction to Robert L.'s hunger creates a negative and powerless tone. Duras uses the word "faim" five times. "Pain" (bread) appears three times. There are two "riens," one "impossible," and one "ne sait pas." The

verb “pouvoir” occurs four times, all in the negative except “on peut toujours tendre du pain dans le vide.” Holding out bread in the void is futile and yet the only thing she can do, the only affirmative use of the word “pouvoir.” In her powerlessness, Robert L.’s hunger—itself a void—waits patiently for Marguerite to die, if we follow Bray who translates “la tête” not as “his head” but as “your head.” Marguerite, speaking to herself says, “His hunger wheels around in your head like a vulture” (34). The vulture, symbol of death and patience, is (“pareille à”) Robert L.’s hunger, and the bird is circling Marguerite. In addition to a vulture consuming something dead because it is hungry, hunger consumes Marguerite. Honey, sugar, and pasta are also mentioned in the passage, though we don’t see Marguerite eat or even touch them. “One” or “we” buy them for later, after his return, and Marguerite vows with “je” that she will burn it all if he doesn’t make it back alive. She will burn food like Robert L.’s hunger burns, creating absence by burning, fighting fire with fire, void with void, hunger with hunger.

Marguerite does consume one thing: coffee. In the first instance, coffee is a drug. She takes it with corydrane (or speed), a stimulant composed of aspirin and amphetamine (42). In the second instance, corydrane also accompanies the coffee, but we can consider coffee as more than a drug because she mentions the taste, “le goût.” Here, Marguerite drinks the coffee just after she learns that Robert L. was seen alive two days before. Duras writes: “Elle fait le café. D. répète : ‘Dans deux jours on le verra arriver.’ Le café est prêt. Le goût du café chaud : Il vit. Je m’habille très vite” (52) “She makes the coffee. D. repeats, ‘We’ll have him here in a couple of days.’ The coffee’s ready. The taste of hot coffee. He’s alive. I dress very quickly” (39). Duras uses the dissociated third person “elle.” Then, hot coffee on the tongue brings her back to her own body, at least for a moment, and as she dresses, she reinhabits her own body with the “je.” There is also a notable colon. In her translation, Bray uses a period (Duras, *The War* 39). However, in the original, “The taste of hot coffee” and “he’s alive” are not separated by a period but linked by a colon. Colons can stand in for “it is;” that which follows can provide description or explanation (“Punctuation”). The fact that he’s alive explains how she can drink and taste the coffee. Now, she can consume something instead of being consumed because consumption is once again linked to life.

One thin body, one walking corpse: facing the void together

The return of Robert L.’s walking corpse and Marguerite’s ensuing scream beckons the unmarked shift to the second half of “La Douleur.” The pain of missingness gives way to the pain of witnessing the effects of the concentration camp on the human body. The geographical gap between Marguerite and Robert L. closes and an epistemological gap opens, or rather, becomes salient.

With the help of François Mitterrand, Georges Beauchamp and D. managed

to rescue Robert L. at Dachau after the camp's liberation (*La Douleur* 65-68). When they return with Robert L., Marguerite tries to run away, but she meets Robert L. face-to-face in the stairway. The body no longer lies in her imagination's ditch but stands before her. Although he is in the state she expected, feared, and imagined, now that he is real and present, she cannot take it. "La guerre sortait dans des hurlements. Six années sans crier" (69) "The war emerged in my shrieks. Six years without uttering a cry" (53-54). We imagine the metaphorical abscess she writes of earlier (39) bursting. However, an easy dénouement does not follow. Missingness gives way to suffering as a "survivor of [Robert L.'s] survival" (Kim 137).

The moment of Robert L.'s return constitutes a shift in the link between the spouses' bodies. The difference between Marguerite's thin body and Robert L.'s walking corpse speaks to the violence of the camps. While Marguerite denied herself food, Robert L. stole it and ate the inedible: "Évidemment il avait fouillé dans les poubelles pour manger, il avait mangé des herbes, il avait bu de l'eau des machines" (74) "Of course he'd rummaged in trashcans for food, he'd eaten wild plants, drunk water from engines" (58). Marguerite still has no desire to eat, but Robert L. experiences "une douleur intense et muette" (70) "a great, silent pain" (55) when they deny him the clafoutis because it could cause an "accident," a euphemism for death. Once he has recovered enough to eat, Marguerite watches him eat from the sitting-room door (78) and they are thus separated. Duras writes: "Quand les plats n'arrivent pas assez vite il sanglote et il dit qu'on ne le comprend pas" (77) "If the dishes don't come fast enough, he sobs and says we don't understand" (62). And it's true, they cannot understand.

In 1947, Antelme published *L'Espèce humaine*, about his time in the Buchenwald, Gandersheim, and Dachau camps.⁷ His work expresses that which Duras's cannot about the dehumanizing violence of starvation. Here, we turn to Aimé Césaire's concept of *thingification* to understand the role of food in Antelme's text and in the echoes of Antelme's experience in "La Douleur." In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire writes "colonization = 'thingification,'" explaining that colonizers commodified the colonized, stripping the colonized of their humanity to extract labor for their own capitalist gain (42-43).⁸ Césaire writes that "the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal" (41). Although our focus

⁷ See Crowley's deft side-by-side analysis of *L'Espèce humaine* and *La Douleur* (notably "Albert des Capitales").

⁸ In this 1950 essay, Césaire argues that Nazism was a natural consequence for bourgeois capitalist Europe's colonialism. By dehumanizing the colonized, the colonizer himself became barbaric in a process Césaire calls the "boomerang effect" (36, 41). In this view, Hitler's barbarism in Europe was a symptom of centuries of European barbarism on other continents. Of course, we would add that Nazi's victims themselves cannot be blamed, but Césaire explains that fascism became possible in Europe because of the "mora[l] disease" it inflicted upon itself through colonialism (39).

remains on the effects of Nazi barbarism and not the origins of or the perpetuation of barbarism, Césaire's essay opens a door to thinking about dehumanization in the camps, as seen in Antelme's text especially. Césaire writes of treating men like animals, but the colonizer commodifies colonized bodies—making the value of their bodies only what they can extract from them. In the Nazi camps, people were treated either as immediately disposable or as extractable labor machines. Antelme writes about how the absence of food—or the presence of *just enough*—rendered inmates objects, or “mechanisms” (Ponnou-Delaffon 36). Dehumanization, therefore, can mean animalization but also *thingification*, a process which leads to valuing man even less than animals. Antelme's body did not take on food to survive, but merely let it pass through, as if his body were “des tuyaux à soupe” (Antelme 101, Ponnou-Delaffon 26), “plumbing for soup” (95).⁹

During Robert L.'s absence, Marguerite does not imagine the resulting humiliation of *thingification*, only able to focus on the void. But *thingification* is indissociable from the void for the inmates (Antelme 101). Antelme concludes, though, that the Nazis fail and that solidarity and other acts of resistance (e.g., taking their time when going to the latrines) remind the inmates that they are human (228-29; Ponnou-Delaffon 37). However, in Duras's account, Robert L. apologizes for standing before her “réduit à ce déchet” (69) “reduced to this rubbish.”¹⁰ Either Duras put the word “déchet” in his mouth, or Robert L. did not always have the strength to affirm his humanness or his value. *Déchet* means waste, rubbish, or nothing. As we saw, Marguerite also “resemble[d] nothing” (33), but Robert L.'s severe state shows to what point the human can be so near nothing and still live (Duras 75). Earlier, we described Marguerite's “nothing” body as pure absence. Here, in light of Robert L.'s word “déchet,” we can also consider “nothing” as devoid of value. Marguerite's self-deprivation results in part from the lack of value she sees in her body, save its sole task to rescue Robert L.

Neither Marguerite nor readers can continue to confuse her body with his. Yet, the second half of the narrative is not a clear departure from the first. Although Marguerite already knows that she will ask for a divorce, she continues to identify her body with Robert L.'s. This identification results in fear and solidarity, manifesting in what both spouses take into their bodies and what they expel from them (i.e., screams and shit). The distance upon reunification, however, results in Marguerite's witnessing of what starvation has done to Robert L.'s body.

Kim's chapter on Duras and Romain Gary presents an in-depth analysis on this passage about Robert L.'s recovery. Kim equates shit with death, demonstrating how Robert L. must first expel death for seventeen days before he can come back to life (141). Marguerite's care restores Robert L. to life by taking

⁹ All translations for *L'Espèce Humaine* are from Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler's translation, *The Human Race*.

¹⁰ Bray translates this as “reduced to such a wreck” (54).

care of his body and its excretions as she would of her own and she thus “suspend[s] the intra-human distinction that would maintain subjectivities in a relation of I-you, self-other” (148). She argues that Duras’s writing of Robert L.’s shit demonstrates an ethics of care based on the dissolution of the self-other boundary (135, 148). Kim’s reflections on this boundary can shed light on the entire text, not only on the recovery passage, and we have demonstrated that this distinction had ceased to exist long before—Marguerite identified herself so completely with Robert L.’s body even during his absence.

Marguerite cannot understand Robert L.’s suffering, and yet she continues to define herself through Robert L.’s body, and not only because she is consumed by caring for him. Marguerite also expels the war, her own war as a woman waiting: “un combat sans nom, sans armes, sans sang versé, sans gloire, à la pointe de l’attente” (48) “a nameless battle, a battle without arms or bloodshed or glory; we’re in a vanguard of waiting” (35). It comes out in her aforementioned scream (69). Seeing a corpse can give rise to the uncanny. Fuchs explains the uncanny as experienced in grief. Although grief is different from missingness and from reuniting with the missing one, Fuchs’s explanation can help us to understand Marguerite’s reaction. Fuchs writes: “The familiar intercorporeal and affective intentions bounce off the pure materiality of the corpse” (Fuchs 51). Robert L. is alive, but barely. Indeed, when the doctor arrives, he mistakes Robert L.’s body as a lifeless “form” (*La Douleur* 70). This may give Marguerite a glimpse of the dissolution of boundaries between life and death and between herself and Robert L. Fuchs writes: “It is as if the border between the dominion of life and the dominion of death has become blurred” (52). Marguerite sees a near-corpse, the materiality of her own being, and she sees at once Robert L.’s death and her own. This is not so different from what she imagined before—her body and his consumed by starvation and death—but now he stands before her, subjecting Marguerite to the uneasiness of the uncanny.¹¹ This—seeing his death and her own, seeing what is sacred (for her, humanity) reduced to *nothing*—is perhaps the thing that “horrifies” Duras about what she rereads in the rediscovered notebooks (12)¹²

We see in both Duras’s and Antelme’s writings the idea of solidarity and of humanity as sacred. In this solidarity and the sacred, bread (or its absence or scarcity) plays the central role, as in the Eucharist. In the concentration camp, bread can either threaten to further *thingify* (bread only used to make the machine function) or remind the inmate of his humanness. In *L’Espèce humaine*, Antelme writes about a German woman factory worker who takes the risk to give him a bit of bread. He writes: “Ce n’est pas du pain de l’usine Buchenwald, du pain = travail = schlague = sommeil; c’est du pain humain” (Antelme 65; Ponnou-Delaffon 40)

¹¹ Kim cites Jane Bradley Winston who reads the passage through a lens of Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection (Kim 143, Winston 149), which is closely related to the uncanny.

¹² Bray uses the word “appalls” (4) to translate “épouvante.”

“This isn’t bread from the Buchenwald factory, where bread equals work equals truncheon equals sleep; this is human bread” (60). Ponnou-Delaffon calls this a “secular communion” (41), which is seen again in *L’Espèce humaine* when a blind inmate offers his bread to Antelme, “literally sacrific[ing] his own body, his own life” (Ponnou-Delaffon 41)—a sacrifice even if it is in exchange for information from those who can see (Antelme 87). In the draft of “La Douleur” in *Cahiers de la guerre*, Duras explicitly presents the metaphor of holy communion: “Take, eat, this is my body” (*Wartime* 107). Duras evokes the equation of human body = bread = sacrifice = solidarity, situating it in a broader context of what bread means in war (including class warfare) and within her ongoing macabre thoughts. She writes: “Pendant que nous mangions du pain, eux ne mangeaient pas de pain. [...] À ras de terre des cadavres, des millions de cadavres. À la place du blé, des moissons de cadavres: Prenez et mangez, ceci est mon corps” (175) “While we were eating bread, they weren’t. [...] Corpses thick on the ground, millions of corpses. Instead of wheat, crops of corpses: Take, eat, this is my body” (107). Starved to death (or starved, then gassed or shot), the dead bodies themselves become food—fertilizer for the earth. Here, Duras references communion while expressing her anger at Christians who are too quick to forgive and at the French who endured scarcity but not starvation and yet complained. Duras did not preserve this passage in the 1985 publication. Yet, all of “La Douleur” can be interpreted as a communion—of personal sacrifice in solidarity. Sacrificing her own body to feed Robert L. is precisely what Marguerite wanted to do, but could not, when she held out that bread in the void. Solidarity in this extreme case necessitates that Marguerite join Robert L. in death (in the sense that his body is coming back from a land of death). When Robert L. returns, Marguerite’s solidarity is no longer in vain. Instead of (or in addition to) denying herself food, she also meets the death which he expels. Kim writes, “To wipe—to enter into contact with shit—is to consent to take on that living dead status, to consent to be a bit more dead so that someone who is dead might be a bit more alive” (148).

Marguerite does not eat again until Robert L. is home and has recovered enough to consume more than broth (78). Even then, food is largely absent for Marguerite. Meanwhile, Robert L.’s hunger becomes a bottomless pit, a void, which consumes all of Robert L. Duras writes, “Il a disparu, la faim est à sa place. Le vide donc est à sa place. Il donne au gouffre, il remplit ce qui était vidé, les entrailles décharnées” (77) “He has gone and hunger has taken his place. Emptiness has taken his place. His is giving to the void, filling what was emptied: those wasted bowels” (61). The shift from the first to the second part of the narrative, thus, also includes this flip, from void as absence of food/absence of Robert L. to void as Robert L.’s hunger.

Marguerite and Robert L. begin eating again, together (78). Using the

collective pronoun “on,” Duras writes: “on survit” (78) “we’re surviving.”¹³ The narrative of Robert L.’s rescue from Dachau and his recovery includes the following food: a trout Robert L. desired before dying (he thought he would not recover) (68), rum forced down Marguerite’s throat (69), a clafoutis aux cerises too dangerous for Robert L. to eat (70), cautious spoonfuls of broth fed to Robert L. (72), Robert L.’s liver and spleen which his own body seems to have eaten (74), meat juice for Robert L. (75), the dry meat leftover from making the juice, for Marguerite (78), three lamb chops from which Robert L. meticulously eats each piece of meat (77), bread stolen by Robert L. from the refrigerator (78), and lemon juice that Marguerite squeezes into her mouth (83).

Robert L. recovers, and the last line of “La Douleur” asserts that “Il n’est pas mort au camp de concentration” (85) “He didn’t die in the concentration camp” (68). Nevertheless, the memory of the absence is ever present. The last mention of food in the text is a year after Robert L.’s return. Marguerite and a friend squeeze the juice from a half lemon into their mouths. Duras writes: “Le citron coule goutte à goutte dans notre gorge, il arrive sur notre faim et nous en fait mesurer la profondeur, la force” (83) “[The lemon] runs down our throats drop by drop, reaches our hunger, and makes us feel its depth and strength” (67). The last thing we see Marguerite consume is something that makes her feel the depth of her hunger and that makes her remember the void.

Conclusion

At its core, “La Douleur” is a narrative of a void. Other, non-alimentary signs of the void include repeated negations throughout the text, notably the words “rien” “nothing” and “aucun.e” “none.” Several entries begin with “rien” (57, 59), and characters greet each other with these void words. Duras writes: “on ne me dit plus bonjour. On dit: ‘Aucune nouvelle?’ Je dis: ‘Aucune’” (17) “People don’t say hello [...] any more. They say, ‘Any news?’ And I say, ‘No’” (9). “La Douleur” and Antelme’s *L’Espèce humaine* have a call and response of nothingness, but the “rien” is not the same. For the camp survivor, extreme deprivation reveals nothingness in its truest form. Antelme writes: “Il n’y en avait vraiment plus [de pain]. [...] Il n’y avait plus rien à mâcher. Rien. D’aucune autre chose le manque n’appelle autant ce mot: rien” (88) “There really wasn’t any more [bread]. [...] There was nothing left to chew. Nothing. The lack of no other thing so powerfully evokes that word: *Nothing*” (*Human Race* 83). Absence is not unique to “La Douleur” within Duras’s oeuvre. In fact, it is a defining characteristic of Duras’s oeuvre overall (Ledwina 73).

In “La Douleur,” Duras represents millions of women with an extremely

¹³ Bray translates “on survit” as “you survive” (63).

personal story; it is a narration of an overwhelming common experience of isolation during a period of waiting intensified by a sudden flood of photographs that revealed the horror of Nazi camps. The text centers the embodied human connection between loved ones separated in space and experience. Although most Parisians were certainly not feasting in April 1945, bread was available. Duras writes that it was “criminal” to waste bread ration coupons, and the reader assumes that she buys her bread. Is it also “criminal” to refuse bread? Although *taking* bread is a symbol of the Church’s communion, Duras’s communion—her solidarity—is with humanity, with Robert L.

It is worth noting that *Cahiers* shows Marguerite consuming food, namely bread, before Robert L.’s return. Duras writes that she “nibbled” on bread. We previously cited the scene where Marguerite and D. sit down to eat, Marguerite seemingly eats nothing, feels like vomiting, and asks D. to leave (19). In the early draft, on the same page that the reference to holy communion appears, Duras writes:

On commence à manger. On s’assied. Le morceau de pain dans ma main, je le regarde. J’ai envie de vomir. Le pain mort. Le pain qu’il n’a pas mangé, manquer de pain l’a fait mourir. Ma gorge est fermée, il n’y passerait une aiguille. Le pain, le goût du pain qu’il n’a pas mangé. [...] Je regarde le pain: “Je n’ai pas faim.” D. s’arrête de manger: “Si vous ne mangez pas, je ne mange pas.” Je grignote pour que D. mange (175-176).

We start eating. We sit down again. The piece of bread in my hand...I look at it. I feel like vomiting. The dead bread. The bread he didn’t eat. Not having bread is what killed him. My throat closes up—a needle couldn’t get through. The bread, the taste of the bread he didn’t eat. [...] I look at the bread. ‘I’m not hungry.’ D. stops eating. ‘If you don’t eat, I don’t eat.’ I nibble so that D. will eat” (107).

When rewriting this for publication, Duras omits that Marguerite “nibbles” on the bread. Duras did not alter the passage’s main idea with the revision. In both versions, she communicates that the food in her hand only made her think of the food that Robert L. lacked. The “closed throat” line in the earlier version attests to the fact that loss of appetite and self-deprivation of food were part of the experience Duras first intended to communicate. The 1985 version, however, omits the nibbling. While readers may not believe that Marguerite truly ate nothing for months, Duras’s omission of nibbling hyperbolizes, emphasizes that part of her war: obsession of another’s hunger, of waiting, and of living in the dark. Of course, abstaining from food does not make another less hungry, but as Marguerite suffers missingness, she refuses food and strengthens her imagined bond to bring Robert L.’s body to Paris, through her own body.

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