ARTICLE

Marriage and the City: Fatal Displacement in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*

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SUMMARY

This article is based upon an analysis of *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, a story authored by Honoré de Balzac within his seminal collection *La Comédie humaine*. The theme of fatal displacement in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* is an allegory of the repressions of nineteenth-century modernity and is presented through the tumultuous marriage of the bourgeois protagonist, Augustine Guillaume, to the aristocrat artist, Théodore de Sommervieux. It is also depicted through Augustine's literal movement within the city of Paris that ensues after their marriage (from her home, the Chat-qui-Pelote, to her husband's home, her attempted return to the Chat-qui-Pelote, and her visit to her husband's mistress). These displacements are not only the source of Augustine's premature death but are emblematic of the perishing past in a post-revolutionary, modern Paris.

The development of this conclusion comes through a close analysis of the principal text itself as well as of the literal and figurative displacements that occur throughout to the main character, Augustine. In studying these displacements, not only are the social structures and institutions (at the time of the novel) considered but also the detailed images of the past that anchor Augustine in traditions that do not let her transition into modernity. We examine the portrayal of marriage in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* as it coincides to the ideals of marriage in pre and post-Revolution periods. Additionally, the various geographical areas (as pinpointed by specific roads provided by the author) are studied as a way of understanding the historical background and the effect of displacement from various areas of Paris to others. The title of the story (which references the sign outside of the protagonist's house), the Chat-qui-Pelote, also offers rich symbolism that, when deciphered, substantiates the claim that this story goes far beyond an unfortunate marriage caused by class disparity. Instead, Augustine's trajectory in the story, she being the human embodiment and relic of ancient French traditions, alludes to a foundational inability for past ways of French life to survive in modernity.

KEYWORDS: Honoré de Balzac, Displacement, Marriage, *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, At the Sign of The Cat and Racket, Movement, Modernity, *La Comédie humaine*, Paris

> *Les humbles et modestes fleurs, écloses dans les vallées, meurent peut-être, se dit-il, quand elles sont transplantées trop près des cieux, aux régions où se forment les orages, où le soleil les brûlent.*
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> —Balzac (cited in *Maison* 121)
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> *Les Français ont fait en 1789 le plus grand effort auquel se soit jamais livré aucun peuple, afin de couper pour ainsi dire en deux leur destinée, et de séparer par un abîme ce qu'ils avaient été jusque-là de ce qu'ils voulaient être désormais. Dans ce but, ils ont pris toutes sortes de précautions pour ne rien emporter du passé dans leur condition nouvelle; ils se sont imposé toutes sortes de contraintes pour se façonner autrement que leurs pères; ils n'ont rien oublié enfin pour se rendre méconnaissables…[mais] à leur insu ils avaient retenu de l'Ancien Régime la plupart des sentiments, des habitudes, des idées même à l'aide desquelles ils avaient conduit la Révolution qui le détruisit et que, sans le vouloir, ils s'étaient servis de ses débris pour construire l'édifice de la société nouvelle ; de telle sorte que, pour bien comprendre et la Révolution et son œuvre, il fallait oublier un moment la France que nous voyons, et aller interroger dans son tombeau la France qui n'est plus.*
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> (cited in Tocqueville 25)

Introduction

France of the early nineteenth century was a place of paradox, decidedly detached from the troubles of the Ancien Régime yet indelibly marked by them. Alexis de Tocqueville declares, "Les hommes de 89 avaient renversé l'édifice [l'Ancien Régime], mais ses fondements étaient restés dans l'âme même de ses destructeurs, et sur ces fondements on a pu le relever tout à coup à nouveau et le bâtir plus solidement qu'il ne l'avait jamais été" (Tocqueville 90). In the aftermath of the Revolution, France achieved tremendous social and political advancement, but this movement forward was not without impediment. Though the century was characterized by progression, it was still seized "by deep social anxieties and phobias, which it is tempting to explain by the trauma of the French revolution" (Ariane Smart, "Guillotine" 17). This paradox of the past existing within and, in a sense, haunting the present is clear since French society at the time was still preoccupied by memories of the guillotine (17). Moreover, this juxtaposition of past and present is especially apparent at the heart of the country: Paris. It is here that the Revolution peaks in the late eighteenth century and ushers in a modernity determined to clear out the past religious and monarchial ways of life. While this change is often seen as abrupt, the evolution from the Ancien Régime to modern France was not only gradual but markedly uneven and incomplete. This rutted transition is why the post-revolutionary world is troubled by its past. David Harvey states that "one of the myths of modernity is that it constitutes a radical break with the past . . . [so as] to see the world as a tabula rasa, upon which the new can be inscribed without reference to the past—or, if the past gets in the way, through its obliteration" (1).

Author of the vast *Comédie Humaine*, Honoré de Balzac depicted through allegorical stories the brutal, unyielding modernity sweeping through the country. This modernity collided

with the past through the characters of his novels—in their predicaments, in their inability to adapt and to abandon the old, and, for many, in their death. Survival in modernity required an abandonment of the past, and this repression was "grounded in a historical rupture; the sudden break with feudalism and Catholicism realized in Republican modernity" (Sprenger, "Mind as Ruin" 123). However, the consequences emerging from this rupture provoked "a conglomeration of residual feelings, habits, and memories" (123), and many of the characters in Balzac's novels as well as in his contemporaries and others later on (Hugo, Flaubert, Zola, and Dumas) enter into and face this modernity with these lingering reflexes. Some, who can abandon them, negotiate the transition well while others, unable to surrender their past, die. In what follows, we will explore how the protagonist, Augustine Guillaume from Balzac's *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, is a fated figure emblematic of the vanishing past in a post-revolutionary, modern Paris. Her physical and spiritual displacement in Paris, spurred by a catastrophic marriage, proves fatal since she is unable to return to times bygone or to survive in the present.

Nineteenth-Century Fatal Displacements

The idea of fatal displacement involves characters in literal motion—their comings and goings in space, whether that space is rural, urban, or involves a passage between both. Though most movement in literature is benign, in some works displacement can be deadly. *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, a clear representation of this death by displacement, is a work that situates itself within the themes that Balzac and most nineteenth-century authors often deal in: man's place in society and the influences of environment, love, and wealth.[1] In particular, many of his œuvres are concerned with early nineteenth-century Paris, the capital of modernity, and, specifically, with the lives of those who thrive in the city and with those who die in their attempts to prosper there. Why do some transitions to or within the city prove fruitful and others fatal? Balzac considers that those who have been displaced to or within Paris and succeed in being able to *franchir le seuil* of modernity have only done so by relinquishing their past self and disassociating themselves from it. These characters are typically not the most savory or genuine. Vautrin, the Goriot daughters, and Rastignac are examples of Balzac characters who survive modernity through their callousness and deceit. As Göran Blix puts it, these characters "became differentiated into distinct species" (2), a species that is despicable, disingenuous, and yet admirable because of their ruthless ability to evolve. This differentiation comes because of their encounter with and acceptance of the post-Revolution social environment of Paris that thrives on money and implicitly rejects Christian spiritually. They reject religious support since the dominant "Christian faith had lost its power over humanity, for this set of beliefs was no longer suited to the contemporary situation" (Faccarello 51). Others, however, such as Père Goriot, Lucien de Rubempré, Cousin Pons, Colonel Chabert, and Augustine Guillaume, are earnest, sincere, naïve, and unalterable in spirit. In Paris, these characters not only have "little chance of passage from one social destiny to another" (2), but little chance of surviving the passage of the old to the new. This is because "Paris, symbolising the ultimate city . . . is where the pure and the innocent are not only ruined but indeed demonised by the cupidity of the majority" (Smart, "Darkness" 6).

It is important, before examining *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, to understand the various trajectories of certain dangerously displaced characters in Balzac's works and in others'. In *Le Père Goriot,* the elderly and retired Jean-Joachim Goriot leaves his home and moves to Paris to be near his daughters. He rents a room in Madame Vauquer's sordid boarding house in the city.

Over time he moves from the nicest apartment offered to progressively more dilapidated rooms. His continuing displacement culminates with his death as he enters his grave having withered away into nothing after a life of sacrifice for his two selfish, avaricious daughters. Father Goriot gives them his all until he expires, destitute, "sur son grabat" (512) and surrounded by people who would prefer to eat than mourn. They callously remark, "Tant mieux pour lui qu'il soit mort" (517). In this ending, one can understand why Balzac labels Goriot a "Christ de la Paternité" (393)—it only confirms that Christianity, sincerity, and self-sacrifice have no place in modern France.[2]

In *Illusions perdues* and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, Lucien de Rubempré, a transplant from the small, country town of Angoulême to Paris, dies in the city after attempting to become successful there. He is destabilized by Paris where "la vie y est d'une effrayante rapidité" (*Splendeurs* 360). In time, Lucien's love affairs with prostitutes (especially his fixation on Esther) and his liaisons with the depraved lead him to prison and to a self-inflicted demise. His dream is similar to, as Jean-Michel Lanskin expresses, "maintes jeunes paysannes [qui] s'y envolaient aussi; la plupart avec l'ambition plus modeste de se faire un nid dans . . . la capitale. [Mais], plus d'une jeune campagnarde se retrouvait plus tard, sans panier ni tablier, pigeonnée et plumée dans un hôtel de passe" (105). For Lucien, his displacement to Paris never becomes a positive transformation, and even though he must "cut himself off from his past, traditions and social group" he still cannot negotiate "the rules of the urban game" (Smart, "Darkness" 117).

Moreover, it is not only the provincials such as Père Goriot and Lucien who come to the city and cannot adapt, but even those who are accustomed to Paris and have "the infernal hue of Parisian faces" (Balzac, *Colonel* 318) cannot negotiate the transition. Balzac's Colonel Chabert, once an officer in Napoleon's army, is displaced from his home in Paris to the carnage of war in Russia. His displacement takes him to a symbolic death after he is interred with the deceased on the Russian front. Still, his displacement does not conclude in this grave, but he escapes the "ventre de la fosse . . . enterré sous les morts" (40, 43), remembers who he is with time, and journeys home. However, his arrival back home in Paris, now years later, is not joyous. In the Paris to which Chabert returns, he is obsolete and fades away, unable to forget the honor and wealth that should be his. However, this focus on the irrecoverable past betrays him and at the end he has forgotten himself; to his solicitors he cries, "Pas Chabert! pas Chabert! je me nomme Hyacinthe . . . je ne suis plus un homme, je suis le numéro 164, septième salle" (139). The hyacinth flower is associated with rebirth and thus the colonel has been reborn in Paris, though not as he once was. He is no longer a viable member of the city but is merely a physical relic of the brave solider he once was. Having been reduced to a number and a room with "toute la naïveté d'un gamin de Paris" (139), he is dead again, but this time in his native Paris "enterré sous des vivants" (43).[3]

Marriage in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*

Balzac's *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* is the opening work in *La Comédie Humaine* and the beginning of his *Études de moeurs*. In the novel, Balzac creates a story that revolves around the literal and psychological shifts that Augustine Guillaume (the daughter of a bourgeois draper) experiences. Born in an old quartier in Paris, Augustine marries and leaves her home for a new, more modern life only to realize that she cannot survive in that world. It is the act of marriage and the physical displacement from her home, first to the home of her husband and then to the

home of his mistress, that trigger her eventual exile. She is left ostracized from her family, social class, her husband himself, and not only her entire past but her future as well. These separations strip her of her identity and lead her to her decline and, at the end of the story, her premature death. Similar to, yet different from, the previous examples of fatal displacement, Augustine's eventual demise is due to multiple displacements within Paris despite never actually leaving the city. She represents Balzac's contention that though the past still persists in modernity, it is not a viable past, but a vanishing ghost.

Despite the novel's traumatic ending, the story foreshadows the unfortunate trajectory of Augustine and Théodore's relationship from the beginning. In the opening scene, Théodore, hoping to encounter Augustine outside the Chat-qui-Pelote, catches a glimpse of his love who appears at her window in the early morning. However, she is surprised by the sight of her admirer:

> elle les baissa [les yeux] sur les sombres régions de la rue, où ils rencontrèrent aussitôt ceux de son adorateur . . . elle se retira vivement en arrière, le tourniquet tout usé tourna, la croisée redescendit avec cette rapidité qui, de nos jours, a valu un nom *odieux* à cette naïve invention de nos ancêtres, et la vision disparut. (Balzac, *Maison* 14; emphasis added)

In this instance, Augustine and Théodore are cut off from each other by the sash window or, in French, the *fenêtre à la Guillotine*. This violent reference to the horrors of the Revolution prefigures the division that will continually hinder the total union to one another since Augustine is a symbol of the past and Théodore of modernity. Yet even before we understand who they are, Augustine and Théodore are depicted here as inextricably separated both physically and ideologically.

Though this foretelling scene opens the novel, Théodore walks by the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote once beforehand. At that time he was struck by the beauty of the young girl within, Augustine, who seemed "un ange exilé qui se souvient du ciel" (35), as though she held a memory of a perfect world that no longer existed. If we already comprehend that Augustine is representative of a pre-Revolutionary way of life, a past life, that is being propelled into modernity, then we can appreciate this image of her as an angel in the context of Walter Benjamin's description of a Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" (Benjamin, "Concept" 434), wherein the angel, deeply connected to the past, is forced into modernity in a way similar to Augustine's trajectory in the story and is

> un ange qui semble sur le point de s'éloigner de quelque chose qu'il fixe du regard . . . C'est à cela que doit ressembler l'Ange de l'Histoire. Son visage est tourné vers le passé . . . [où] il ne voit, lui, qu'une seule et unique catastrophe, qui sans cesse amoncelle ruines sur ruines et les précipite à ces pieds. Il voudrait bien s'attarder, réveiller les morts et rassembler ce qui a été démembré. Mais . . . une tempête qui s'est prise dans ses ailes . . . et le pousse irrésistiblement vers l'avenir auquel il tourne le dos, tandis que le monceau de ruines devant lui s'élève jusqu'au ciel. Cette tempête est ce que nous appelons le progrès. (434)

Yet despite Augustine's profound connection to the past, the modern artist Théodore decides to paint her portrait in a great ensuing frenzy where he is overcome by "un amour limpide et bouillonnat . . . [telle qu'il] ne mangea pas, ne dormit point" (Balzac, *Maison* 35). Through this feverish process he falls in love with her, now "son idole" (35). Augustine soon becomes aware of his affection—"elle était aimée ! il lui était impossible d'en douter" (41)—and she falls in love with him as well.

Nevertheless, it is significant to recognize that their strong emotions of love are primarily inspired by "un moment de folie . . . [et] une ivresse qui [les] livrait en quelque sorte à la nature" (41), and even though they fall in love, Augustine and Théodore are quite each other's opposite. Augustine, just as her name alludes to the early Christian theologian, is a religious, sensitive, bourgeois girl. Balzac chooses St. Augustine as her namesake perhaps in order to connect and contrast his novel *City of God* to the city of Paris, a book that presents the conflict of the City of God (marked by people who commit themselves to eternal truths) and the Earthly City (marked by people who dedicate themselves to the pleasures of the present world). If Augustine represents a pre-Revolution Christianity, since she grows up and is educated in a home "qui ressemblait assez à une succursale de la Trappe" (33), she is the embodiment of this righteous, God-seeking city while simultaneously living in Paris, a type of St. Augustine's Earthly City where "l'envie de s'enrichir à tout prix, le goût des affaires, l'amour du gain, la recherche du bien-être et des jouissances matérielles y sont donc les passions les plus communes" (Tocqueville 29).

Besides her natural religious nature, Augustine is naive and not vastly educated. Balzac explains that for both her and her sister, Virginie, "leurs idées n'avaient pas pris beaucoup d'étendue" (Balzac, *Maison* 26), since they are "élevées pour le commerce" (26), a commerce that is not modern but that conserves the ancient traditions and costumes of the profession and stays "au milieu de la civilisation nouvelle comme ces débris antédiluviens retrouvés par Cuvier" (17).

Théodore, conversely, is a secular, learned, aristocrat artist "au caractère fougueux" (44) that profits from yet has "une espèce de dédain pour la richesse" (102) and religion. Fausto Calaça explains that Théodore's "origines sociales—artiste et aristocrate—le placent doublement à l'écart de la bourgeoisie . . . [et qu'] il appartient à la jeunesse de l'Empire" (Calaça 5, 10). He is considered to be one of the first of "le dandysme balzacien" (10), and, though noble, he is not the traditional aristocrat of the century. Instead, he has progressed smoothly in modernity as a type of paradox to his class having become one of the "artistes modernes" (71).

However different they are from each other, the two do fall in love and marry at "le maître-autel de Saint-Leu" (Balzac, *Maison* 73). Their perceptions of marriage, though, prove to be as dissimilar as they are and, in time, cause trouble. Marriage at the time of Augustine and Théodore was much changed from the institution that existed before the beginning of the Revolution in 1789. Sprenger explains that there is a "crucial distinction between the pre-Revolutionary 'marriage sacrament' and the post-Revolution, secularized version of marriage, the 'marriage contract' " ("In the End" 6). For Augustine, a girl who grew up in a Catholic home focused on the traditions of the past, the sacrament of marriage was grounded in "Christ-mediated 'grace,' [that] magically fuses two bodies and two souls into one . . . [and] was thought to be metaphysically indissoluble" (6). This type of union was surely the one she believed she contracted in marriage to Théodore since we are told that she aspires to a complete union of her

soul to Theodore's (Balzac, *Maison* 85). This also explains why Augustine is in a continual yet vain search of being unified, body, mind, and spirit, to her husband: She is "fixated on a form of spiritualized/patriarchal marriage no longer supported by communal belief" (Sprenger 7).

Though dedicated to obtaining the full union provided by a sacramental marriage, Balzac explains, through a response to Augustine from her mother, that Théodore (though an aristocrat) is not seeking the same sacred fulfillment. He is not religious and, as the text tells us, "n'a jamais mis le pied dans une église que pour te voir et t'épouser" (Balzac, *Maison* 96–97)—the first instance spending his time staring at her ("Théodore qui, debout derrière un pilier, priait sa madone [Augustine] avec ferveur" [60)]. Théodore loves the image of Augustine, his Madonna and inspiration, not the holy Madonna, the Virgin Mary. His religion and his sacred fulfillment is art, and therefore his conception of marriage is secular and one of a "mariage moderne vidé de substance spirituelle et affective" (Sprenger, "Union Risible" 292). This marriage contract, emptied of spiritual influence, cannot satisfy the marital expectations of his wife. On their wedding day, many see the pair as mismatched and destined to failure since many see it as Augustine's draper father understands it: "Il comparait les mariages ainsi faits à ces anciennes étoffes de soie et de laine, dont la soie finissait toujours par couper la laine" (Balzac, *Maison* 69)—a poor combination of fineness (the silk) and coarseness (the wool) that would end in ruin.

Despite the incompatibility between the wife and husband and the ill-fated nature of their union, both Augustine and Théodore live happily for their first two years of marriage. However, they live artificially isolated in Théodore's home, absorbed in each other and achieving a passionate "union corporelle" (76). In time and after the birth of their first child, Théodore returns to old habits; "[il] reprit, avec la tranquillité d'une possession moins jeune, sa pente et ses habitudes" (78–79) as they were in his life before he met Augustine. "[Il] retourna chercher quelques distractions dans le grand monde" (78), and the more he is again around people similar to him in passion and taste, the more he realizes the degree to which Augustine's ways are simplistic and unrefined. Balzac tells us that "au sein de ce bonheur, elle resta l'ignorante petite fille qui vivait obscurément rue Saint-Denis, et ne pensa point à prendre les manières, l'instruction, le ton du monde dans lequel elle devait vivre" (77). This ignorance and naïveté plants in Théodore seeds of contempt for his wife, which cause him, over time, "insensiblement une froideur qui ne pouvait aller qu'en croissant" (82). He hopes that "l'habitude de vivre avec des artistes pourrait former sa femme, et développerait en elle les germes de haute intelligence" (82), but she is too anchored in her past ways to effectuate a change and is unable "d'abdiquer sa raison . . . [ni] ses idées religieuses et ses préjugés d'enfance" (86–87).

With Theodore's affection for his wife being so fleeting and capricious, we wonder why Augustine remains so loyal and loving to the point that it eventually kills her; "elle ne voulait pas se séparer de son mari, dût-elle être dix fois plus malheureuse encore" (99). At the beginning, Théodore does fall in love with Augustine, but we understand that his love is fleeting since "le peintre éprouve, pour Augustine, un amour esthète . . . alors que la réalité recouvre un mode de vie archaïque" (Amar 152). Thus, once forced beyond a mere skin-deep love, Augustine's bourgeois nature does not translate well in Théodore's world even though her aesthetic beauty does. Simply put, Théodore loves the representation of Augustine—her as a creation on display as though she were an artifact or painting in a museum. Perhaps, though, in Pygmalion fashion, Théodore falls in love with Augustine because it is his *own* representation of her. When he paints

her portrait as well as the scene of the Chat-qui-Pelote, he is "pendant huit mois entiers, adonné à son amour, à ses pinceaux" (Balzac, *Maison* 35).

Yet whether or not Théodore loves his own depiction of Augustine or just her outward beauty, "cette vision déformée de la réalité devint [pour Théodore] même aveuglement" (Amar 154). Once Théodore has painted Augustine and her transformation into art has peaked and concluded, the aesthetic, abstract Augustine (the conception of her into art) is irreproducible. Walter Benjamin confirms this idea by theorizing that, "Even the most perfect reproduction of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space" (Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 298), and thus over time and space in marriage, Théodore recovers from his symbolic "blindness" in regards to Augustine. Though she is still beautiful, Augustine is no longer his desired object—her moment in art is over and her original allure fades. All the traits that once gave Augustine her charm are traits that now, in the perverse world of modernity, are displaced from their context of her life in the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote. At home, she is described as amiable, innocent, intelligent, moral, pious, sensitive, and loving. Moreover, Balzac states that "elle ne connaissait d'ailleurs ni la coquetterie des refus, ni l'empire qu'une jeune demoiselle du grand monde se crée sur un mari par d'adroits caprices" (Balzac, *Maison* 76). Once she crosses over into Théodore's world through marriage, however, her traits translate into naiveté, ignorance, prudishness, and into being puritanical, delicate, dependent, cloistered, having an "esprit de défiance" (81) and an "impropriété de son langage et [une] étroitesse des ses idées" (78). In fact, Balzac reveals that "ses idées religieuses et ses préjugés d'enfance s'opposèrent à la complète émancipation de son intelligence. Enfin, il s'était glisse contre elle, dans l'âme de Théodore, une prévention qu'elle ne put vaincre" (86).

Muriel Amar sees that this dilemma also has root in "le malentendu entre le monde commerçant, qui évolue dans un univers matériel, et le monde artistique, qui en privilégie l'aspect esthétique" (Amar 151). Augustine, daughter of a merchant, may have found a place in her husband's artistic world through her beauty that has "un rare caractère de beauté *noble*" (Balzac, *Maison* 108; emphasis added), but her spirit and self are of her original sphere and home, one that, now displaced, is rejected. Théodore even remarks, in further reference to her figurative displacement, that "elle [Augustine] n'habitait pas sa sphère" (79).

In light of the displacement and conversion of Augustine's characteristics from her home to her husband's home, Max Andréoli explains that Balzac's particular use of semantics here is "the foundational paradigm [and] is constituted by the opposition of high vs. low, which is . . . one of the keys of the Balzac's work" (Andréoli 50). The original title of the work in 1829 before its change in 1842 was "Gloire et Malheur," which in itself anticipates an opposition. Additionally, it is clear through these two perceptions and descriptions of Augustine as well as the contrast of bourgeois and aristocrat, artist and merchant, material and aesthetic, artifice and sincerity, religious and secular, and past and present, that there is a foundational displacement existing even on a linguistic level in the novel.

Yet despite the novel's predilection for conflict and the insensibility that seizes Théodore, Augustine still strives to bridge the differences. She attempts to become more learned and open to new ideas in order to win back her husband's heart. She realizes that she is no artist perhaps, but she still tries to educate herself: "déployant alors cette force de volonté, cette énergie que les femmes possèdent toutes quand elles aiment, madame de Sommervieux tenta de changer son

caractère, ses mœurs et ses habitudes" (Balzac, *Maison* 86). However, her efforts are in vain—"elle ne réussit qu'à devenir moins ignorante" (86)—since she is "nonetheless animated by residual habits and reflexes [of her past and thus] analogous to a living fossil" (Sprenger, "Mind as Ruin" 122). She is unable to reach Théodore's intellectual level and he feels justified in hiding his thoughts from her: "il se crut fort innocent en lui cachant des pensées qu'elle ne comprenait pas et des écarts peu justifiables au tribunal d'une conscience bourgeoise" (Balzac, *Maison* 82).

In this ordeal to revolutionize herself, Augustine at one point calls her memory a rebellious memory ("rebelle mémoire" [86]) because of her inability to renounce the effects of her past upon her present state of mind. Even as she begins to learn new things and strains to acclimate her knowledge to the secular and aesthetic world around her, her efforts are stymied by the fact that she is "trop sincèrement religieuse" (81), a quality that is spurned in her new milieu. Since "the Revolution [has] fundamentally displaced the metaphysics grounding [her] desire" (Sprenger, "In the End" 7) for a sacred union with her husband, Augustine attempts to "marry the world" (7) via art and intelligence to appeal to Théodore since their secular marriage is failing. Though determined, her nature will never allow her to satisfy Théodore: "Augustine s'efforça en vain d'abdiquer sa raison, de plier aux caprices, aux fantasies de son mari . . . [mais] elle ne recueillit pas le fruit de ces sacrifices . . . [et] la fidélité d'Augustine déplut même à cet infidèle mari" (Balzac, *Maison* 87). The gap in her understanding and sentimentality will never permit her a complete bond with her husband, and "une lueur fatale lui fit entrevoir les défauts de contact qui . . . empêchaient l'union complète de son âme avec celle de Théodore" (85). This spiritual displacement from her husband in marriage, an inability to unite with him in mind and spirit as well as in body, is the catalyst of her demise.

The City in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*

In addition to the act of marriage, Augustine's literal displacements within Paris are vital to comprehending the reasons for her death. For Balzac, the city of Paris is living and exercises a power over the people who inhabit it. Each of its neighborhoods with its varying geography has a living, yet delicate, humanity to it such that a change of location, a displacement, even within the city walls, can cause trauma. In his *Histoire des treize*, Balzac opens the novel by explaining the human nature of the roads in Paris:

> Il est dans Paris certaines rues déshonorées autant que peut l'être un homme coupable d'infamie; puis il existe des rues nobles, pus des rues simplement honnêtes, puis de jeunes rues sur la moralité desquelles le public ne s'est pas encore formé d'opinion; puis des rues assassines, des rues plus vieilles que de vieilles douairières ne sont vieilles, des rues estimables, des rues toujours propres, des rues toujours sales, des rues ouvrières, travailleuses, mercantiles. Enfin, les rues de Paris ont des qualités humaines, et nous impriment, par leur physionomie, certaines idées contre lesquelles nous sommes sans défense. (1)

In *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, Balzac is meticulous about naming the streets where the main characters reside and describing the world corresponding to these streets. Stevenson explains: "Balzac croit que chacun est formé par son 'milieu' physique et social" and that, most importantly, the people "d'un quartier ressemblent par leurs mœurs à leur propre quartier" (13–14). In *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* there is rue Saint-Denis, rue du Petit Lion, rue des

Bourdonnais, rue du Colombier, rue des Trois Frères. If "the naming of streets humanizes them" and "brings the . . . urban architecture into a human discourse" (Scobie 76), then Balzac is creating more than just a picture of this part of the city for the reader, but is in fact introducing the "human discourse" or the nature of who lives in the various areas. He immediately opens the story by placing his readers at an intersection, "au milieu de la rue Saint-Denis, presque au coin de la rue du Petit-Lion" (Balzac, *Maison* 1). Among the homes of the road, la maison du Chat-qui-pelote is a building that "aurait mérité d'être placé au Conservatoire des arts et métiers pour y indiquer les premiers efforts de la menuiserie française" (7). Balzac affirms that it is a "débris de la bourgeoisie" (6) that is "formée de tant de différentes espèces d'architecture et de décoration . . . datant de la bourgeoise du seizième siècle" (Stevenson 25), a century where the bourgeoisie lived in ways similar to the aristocracy.

Within this home on the rue Saint-Denis "le régime de la maison Guillaume" (Balzac, *Maison* 44) rules, demanding "obéissance aux lois de la charte domestique" (46) and where "le chef de la famille Guillaume était un de ces nobles gardiens des anciens usages" (17). Similar to the Cottereau (or Chouan) family in Balzac's *Les Chouans*, Monsieur Guillaume is also a merchant that fosters anti-revolutionary and pro-Ancien Régime ideals, "chargé de défendre le territoire de la France" (*Chouans* 57), and his home and place of commerce is a debris of the pre-revolution past. Balzac explains further,

> À cette époque on voyait moins rarement qu'aujourd'hui de ces vieilles familles où se conservaient, comme de précieuses traditions, les mœurs, les costumes caractéristiques de leurs professions, et restées au milieu de la civilisation nouvelle comme ces *débris antédiluviens* retrouvés par Cuvier dans les carrières. (17; emphasis added)

The road, the home, and the people within are of a vanishing tradition that live as relics in a new society as Alex Lascar confirms that Balzac "suggère encore cette presence du passé dans le présent" (Lascar 44). The household itself is ruled as a "*régime*" (Balzac, *Maison* 44; emphasis added) with antiquated practices and laws that signal a connection to the Ancien Régime, or the defunct political system destroyed by the Revolution. Ironically, the Ancien Régime of the eighteenth century would not have privileged wealthy, bourgeois merchants such as the Guillaumes since it was a political and social system that favored the aristocracy; however, this family allies with this system because it had regimented their lives (with exacting traditions and religion) since the sixteenth century (6). Nonetheless, in the modernity of the nineteenth century that changes Paris and all of France, this place—"cette vieille maison patrimoniale" (27)—is not only ill-fitting but, by extension, so is the road itself. Thus, those who live and have grown up in this microsociety are also oddities and vestiges of the past. Jeannine Guichardet remarks that when Théodore comes upon the shop he recognizes immediately that this house on the rue Saint-Denis is a thing of the past—"il observe la maison du Chat-qui-Pelote avec un 'enthousiasme d'archéologue' " (Guichardet 13). He finds its state and the curious ensign of the cat playing racket out of place and laughable (Balzac, *Maison* 7) just as, later on, Augustine "fût souvent moquée" (81) by Théodore and his friends.

Outside of the household of the Chat-qui-Pelote and onto the rue Saint-Denis there exists the merchant world and, in a sense, the world that once was Paris in its glory: "Monsieur Guillaume regarda la rue Saint-Denis, les boutiques voisines et le temps, comme un homme qui débarque au Havre et revoit la France après un long voyage" (16). He considers his home and

buisness as his "vaisseau si tranquille qui naviguait sur la mer orageuse de la place de Paris, sous le pavillon du Chat-qui-Pelote" (47). This metaphor of his merchant life represents the Parisian world of before. The ancient motto of the city, *fluctuat nec mergitur* or "Il est agité par les vagues, et ne sombre pas" is depicted in the Paris coat of arms as a "navire équipé d'argent, voguant sur des ondes du même; au chef cousu d'azur, semé de fleurs de lys d'or" (Tausin 128). Paris the city would be able to, as Tausin says, "se relève plus fier sur le flot qu'il a vaincu et met à profit la fureur même des vents pour arriver plus vite au port . . . [avec] la conviction que, si de nouvelles épreuves lui sont réservées, elle en sortira *toujours* victorieuse : *Fluctuabit at nunquam mergitur*" (129–30; emphasis added). The maison du Chat-qui-Pelote on rue Saint-Denis, sheltered by its antiquity, rejoices in the same sort of assurance of resistance to all the tempests of the future, like a museum that is preserved over the years. Though the Revolution had removed most medieval and feudal laws, the ancient merchant-vessel with its strict regulations—"la nef du Chat-qui-Pelote" (Balzac, *Maison* 76)—survives. And, even though the Chat-qui-Pelote, like Paris, it is still threatened by outside forces, they are the type that are surmountable; "[Le] Chat-qui-Pelote était la proie . . . de ces tempêtes qu'on pourrait nommer équinoxiales à cause de leur retour périodique" (47). It is only when people leave the confines of the home and the street that houses the Chat-qui-Pelote that problems begin to arise. Augustine's departure from the Chat-qui-Pelote, having been lured away by a conception of love, causes her alienation and subsequent death. Her parents, who move into a hotel on rue Colombier and bestow the Chat-qui-Pelote to their newly married daughter Virginie and husband Joseph Lebas (former apprentice under Monsieur Guillaume), are also, like Augustine, unhappy and displaced; "Depuis quatre ans, ils marchaient dans la vie comme des navigateurs sans but et sans boussole" (91). Nonetheless, their literal displacement does not indelibly cut them off from their past, since they discuss their lives ("[ils] se narraient encore les vieilles histoires du quartier Saint-Denis" [91]) and return often to "donner un coup d'oeil à l'établissment du Chat-qui-Pelote" (91).

Besides the commerce aspect of the road that represents the old Paris, the rue Saint-Denis is also a royal, sacred street that leads to the cathedral of Saint-Denis. One of the oldest in Paris, this road is associated with antiquity, with royalty, and with the France of the pre-Revolution. The *Dictionnaire administratif et historique des rues de Paris* reads that it was through the rue Saint-Denis "que les rois et les reines entraient solennellement dans Paris. Toutes les rues, sur leur passage, *étaient tapissées d'étoffes de soies et des draps camelotés*" (179; emphasis added). In this, the Rue Saint-Denis (and, particularly the Chat-qui-Pelote as a drapery business) is representative of a traditional, monarchial France and connected inextricably to a religious history. Furthermore, the home is also called "la Thébaïde de la rue Saint Denis" (38), which again connects it to a religious tradition since the Thebaid is a place in the desert, cut off from the world, where the first Christians went to pray.[4] Therefore, in the sense of the human discourse, Balzac is not only saying that rue Saint-Denis is ancient and Christian, but that the people who live there are also members of a religious and past way of life—human relics of an ancient France that exist tenuously in a modern France. Augustine grows up on this street, and, like the road, is also symbolic of this sacred, traditional past. Thus, when she marries Théodore, those in her neighborhood and her family judge the marriage doomed because, unlike her sister "Virginie, qui fasait, disaient-ils, le mariage le plus solide et restait *fidèle au quartier*" (Balzac, *Maison* 74; emphasis added), Augustine is not staying faithful to her neighborhood; she not only marries outside of the rue Saint-Denis but, in marrying a secular, modern man, Augustine betrays the sacred roots of her quartier.

In contrast to the nature of the rue Saint-Denis, Augustine's displacement becomes literal when, after her marriage to Théodore, she moves to his home on the "rue des Trois-Frères" to an "appartement que tous les arts avaient embelli" (75) in modern Montmartre. As for the road itself, the *Dictionnaire administratif et historique des rues de Paris* says that "l'alignement de la nouvelle rue fut tracé le 3 septembre suivant (1779)" (Lazare 240) and completed some years later. This area is an "ancienne commune de la banlieue de Paris, réunie à la capitale en 1860 et comprise dans le XVIIe arrondissement" (Larousse 516) and this area and road, at the time, were not only about to be newly part of Paris city boundaries, but the area of Montmartre was also one that was beginning to house progressive people and ideas. Théodore, though by heritage an aristocrat, fits in this neighborhood because of his liberal ideas surrounding art and religion, calling himself one of "nous autres artistes modernes" (Balzac, *Maison* 71). As Nicole Myers puts it, "replacing the Latin Quarter as the locus of the city's intellectual and artistic community, Montmartre boasted a thriving bohemian culture that was driven by its critique of a decadent society . . . [and] bourgeois morality" (Myers). It is a quartier that symbolizes a progressive, secular modernity that "was home to every kind of artist" (Myers) and pitted itself against the calm, pious nature of the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote.

With the idea of these two separate streets and neighborhoods in mind, there is a moment when Augustine is overcome with her sufferings, and she attempts to go back to her home on rue Saint-Denis to seek help. Just as the country is for Nana in Zola's eponymous novel, the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote is Augustine's "espace idyllique" and "est également associée au domaine de l'enfance" (Lanskin 113). Just as Nana "se sentait redevenir toute petite" (Zola 1238) and "etait ramenée aux sensations neuves d'une gamine" (1244) in the country, Augustine was an innocent child in the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote. Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* argues for the influence that home can have on an individual's development and memory,[5] and such an intricate and stable place as the Chat-qui-Pelote, one that contains commerce, home life, social life, religious life, and education, would play a momentous role in Augustine's perception of the world and in who she has become. Accordingly, a return home seems a natural and safe recourse for someone in her circumstances. However, Balzac reveals that "une *fatale* pensée lui suggéra [à Augustine] d'aller chercher des consolations et des conseils au sein de sa famille" (Balzac, *Maison* 87; emphasis added), indicating that the displacement she will undertake to return to her family and the family home will be far from beneficial.

When she arrives at the Chat-qui-Pelote, Augustine finds that she no longer belongs there—"elle fut reçue assez froidement" (88) by her sister and brother-in-law. In addition to this unsympathetic welcome, when she subsequently visits her parents at their new residence on the rue Colombier, she realizes that she no longer thinks as they do and finds that they do not understand her and her needs; her father, "le vieux Guillaume quasi-fossile [qui] n'appartient pas à l'histoire en marche" (Guichardet 265), and her mother are "des sortes d'automates archéologiques" (366). They have filled their home with symbols of bourgeois respectability, and their ways have become outdated in a similar way that hers are to Théodore. She soon leaves their residence unsatisfied with their attempts to help her "en sentant l'impossibilité de parvenir à faire bien juger les hommes supérieurs par des esprits faibles" (Balzac, *Maison* 100). She returns again to "la froide atmosphere de son ménage" (100), and here we discover that both her old and new home are now cold and unaccepting. No longer fitting in either her original place or new place, Augustine is displaced beyond being able to move forward or backward.

In this state of desperation for her husband's love and having been rejected from her home, Augustine seals her misfortune and resorts to the grossest error conceivable by visiting the home of the duchesse de Carigliano, her husband's desired mistress. She hopes to convince her to leave Théodore alone and to help her regain her husband's affections. The duchesse is one of the "femmes qui sont nées dans l'opulence" (101). Despite her wealth, she scorns the aristocracy in a way similar to Théodore and has a penchant for the bohemian, living in a place where her "luxe affectait une espèce de dédain pour la richesse" (102). When Augustine enters her home, she immediately feels out of place—her displacement is evident. Even before meeting the duchesse to beg for her husband, she feels "une sorte de désespoir . . . [et] elle put y voir que la duchesse était une femme supérieure en tant que femme" (102–3). Though Augustine is a married women and mother, the duchesse's first words to her are "êtes-vous donc enfant, ma chère petite belle!" (108), infantilizing her.

Though we may perceive from their exchange and their places in society that Augustine and the duchesse are quite different from each other, they are not all that unalike. The duchesse is not an aristocrat by blood, even though she has "les habitudes distinguées de l'aristocratie" (101–2). She may live in one of "les antiques et somptueux hôtels du faubourg Saint-Germain" (101), but the duchesse is called "une duchesse *d'hier*" (68; emphasis added) since she is of the new aristocracy. She is the "daughter of Senator Malin de Gondreville" (Balzac, "Works" 82) a title acquired by her father just before the Revolution, and it is through marriage that she gains the noble title of de Carigliano. However, the duke de Carigliano is a Napoleonic aristocrat since he was ennobled due to his time spent in the army. Augustine, who is also not a noble by birth, has also gained a title, de Sommervieux, through her marriage to Théodore. However, unlike Augustine, the duchesse's displacement to modernity (represented by her new life in marriage to her husband), has been a transition eased not only by the fact that her nobility is modern but also facilitated by her artifice, her false airs of generosity, and her knowledge of the world (Balzac, *Maison* 109). She thrives in her environment and society where, as Tocqueville describes, "L'envie de s'enrichir à tout prix, le goût des affaires, l'amour du gain, la recherche du bien-être et des jouissances matérielles y sont donc les passions les plus communes" (Tocqueville 29). The knowledge and cunning that she imparts to Augustine to help her also make the transition is, she explains, that wives must command their husbands. The women who keep their husband's love are the ones that

> avaient adroitement remarqué les qualités qui leur manquent et, soit qu'elles possédassent ces qualités, ou qu'elles feignissent de les avoir, elles trouvaient moyen d'un faire un si grand étalage aux yeux de leurs maris qu'elles finissaient par leur imposer. (112)

This method of winning Théodore back requires insincerity on the part of Augustine since the duchesse states that "notre pouvoir est factice" and that these are necessary "ruses conjugales" (Balzac, *Maison* 113). However, "se faire un caractère artificiel" (111) for the earnest Augustine is an impossibility. She cannot win her husband, a husband who has chosen this "artificieuse duchesse" (106) over her. She cannot enter into modernity. She cannot negate who she is. Just like Père Goriot, the "Christ de la paternité," dies on the altar of a virtue that had lost its value with the collapse of the Ancien Régime, Augustine dies on the altar of the ideal of faithfulness and Christian marriage, unable to understand and incorporate the new rules practiced by the modern (Napoleonic) aristocracy represented by de Carigliano. She returns, displaced for the

final time, to rue des Trois-Frères, where "la douleur [la] rendait presque insensible" (119), and she dies in the years to come.

Once deceased, Augustine is buried in Montmartre, forever exiled from her home on rue Saint-Denis. The etymology of the name Montmartre has been researched by certain historians who "le font dériver . . . de *mons Martyrium* (mont des Martyrs)" since they believe "la colline de Montmartre comme le théâtre du martyre de saint Denis et de ses campagnons" (Larousse 516). Saint Denis, the "célèbre patron de la France" (516), was beheaded in 250 AD on Montmartre, the highest hill in Paris. It is an interesting coincidence that such a place as Montmartre (just like the rue des Trois-Frères) is where, as it was earlier in history for the martyr Saint Denis, the place that Augustine, the girl from rue Saint-Denis, is, in a sense, martyred.

In the final paragraph of the story, we find that the epitaph inscribed on Augustine's grave reads: "Les humbles et modestes fleurs, écloses dans les vallées, meurent peut-être, se dit-il, quand elles sont transplantées trop près des cieux, aux régions où se forment les orages, où le soleil les brûlent" (Balzac, *Maison* 121). However poetic this inscription may be, it is again a reference to the downfall that occurs from her literal displacement within the city. Augustine, the flower from the "vallée" of Paris—close to la Seine on the rue Saint-Denis—is transplanted, through marriage, to a higher place closer to the skies—the heights and hills of Montmartre "dont le point culminant est à . . . 104 mètres au-dessus de la Seine" (Larousse 516). It is here that she withers away, unable to withstand the storms of her mismatched marriage and the scorching contempt of her husband.

In this metaphor of a displaced flower, Augustine is similar to Blanche-Henriette de Mortsauf in Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée*. In the novel, Henriette, like Augustine, is an icon of purity and devotion who dies from chagrin when her love chooses another, worldlier woman over her. "The meaning of the novel's title is clear and univocal" (Kadish 8). Doris Kadish tells us that Henriette is the "lys dans la vallée" since the "lily is treated as a symbol of purity and equated with the novel's pristine, virtuous heroine" (8). Yet, Kadish continues, explaining that the "lys" has another meaning in the story: "That second meaning—the second sense in which the lily motif can be understood—is that of the *fleur-de-lis*, symbol of monarchy" (8). Augustine, like Henriette, is also a "lys dans la vallée" in the city of Paris, a symbol of purity and innocence amongst infidelity and deceit. We can say that Augustine also symbolizes the Ancien Régime and the traditional ways of the monarchy in that she is the "lys d'or" (Tausin 128) depicted in the *Fluctuat nec mergitur* Paris coat of arms, representing an ancient Paris, a Paris of the Ancien Régime now perishing in modernity. However, though Augustine represents both virtue and the glory of the Ancien Régime, she becomes another victim to the modern city where, as with Père Goriot,

> le char de la civilisation, semblable à celui de l'idole de Jaggernat [qui est une force implacable détruisant tout sur son passage], à peine retardé par un cœur moins facile à broyer que les autres et qui enraie sa roue, l'a brisé bientôt et continue sa marche glorieuse. (*Père* 7)

Social Displacement and Nature

Within *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* exists an odd shift or displacement of the normal trends of the early nineteenth-century social sphere. In the post-Revolutionary Paris of 1829, the year that Balzac pens the novel, France is at the end of the Restoration and on the cusp of the July Monarchy, a reign that ushers in the dominance of the haute bourgeoisie. Thus, it may seem paradoxical that Augustine, a bourgeois, cannot adjust to a modern France that favors her class while Théodore, an aristocrat, transitions and subsists without difficulty. Théodore is a rich, noble artist with a contempt for materialistic society and, like, the duchesse de Carigliano, seeks a worldy, haute bohème lifestyle. Similar to Blix's description of a "distinct species" (Blix 2), Théodore is able to abandon his past and exploit the present for its rejection of ancient systems, its emancipation from Christianity, and its espousal of innovation in art. Though there seems to be a spiritual fervor that animates him, Théodore has displaced the religious for aesthetics. Unlike the aristocratic and religious Madame de Dey and her son, Auguste, who perish inexplicably at the end of Balzac's *Le Réquisitionnaire* and represent the type of nobles that existed in pre-Revolution times (*Réquisitionnaire*), Théodore is not an aristocrat with a proclivity for religion but, instead, mocks it (Balzac, *Maison* 81). We read almost nothing of his family or his life before he encounters Augustine but know only that he is in Paris "en revenant d'Italie" (36) where he had won a great art award (34) and that "son père s'appelait le chevalier de Sommervieux avant la Révolution" (65). Augustine's life and that of her family, conversely, are exposed to the readers. They are fixated on a hierarchal, religious, pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie in "le *régime* de la maison" (88; emphasis added), and thus her transition into modernity is impossible. She, unlike Théodore, cannot renounce her past.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau discusses the "notion of the progressive moral degeneration of mankind from the moment civil society established itself . . . [and] the pristine equality of the state of nature [as] our ultimate goal and criterion" (Israel 274). Balzac employs this idea by rendering Paris and the modernity it represents as a corrupter of men's hearts, while the country, the places that perpetuate ancient structures, represent sites that embody purity. The country "se moque des nouveautés, ne lit rien et veut tout ignorer: science, littérature, inventions industrielles" (Balzac, *Vieille Fille* 80) and in these innocent places, sacred institutions stay untainted. Even though the French Revolution sees widespread dechristianization; the act of marriage is reduced to a civil contract instead of a union of body and spirit, and these sacred institutions can only persist clandestinely in places such as the Chat-qui-Pelote.[6]

For Augustine, the displacement of sacred marriage leaves her desperate—"elle ressemblait à ces malades arrivées à un état désespéré" (Balzac, *Maison* 90)—and seeking for comfort from any source, even if she must search for it in her husband's supposed mistress. Augustine's marriage is doomed from the beginning since she marries someone who is not only irreligious, but who also removes her from the Chat-qui-Pelote, her natural location. Her death by displacement is also a type of "death by marriage" (Sprenger, "Death by Marriage" 59). Compare her tumultuous union to the more suitable marriage of her older sister, Virginie, with Joseph Lebas, their father's apprentice. Though Lebas originally wanted to marry Augustine ("[il] se sentait le coeur entièrement pris pour mademoiselle Augustine la cadette" (Balzac, *Maison* 24)), she does not reciprocate the sentiment, and he is convinced by Monsieur Guillaume to marry the elder. When they do marry (the same day as Augustine and Théodore), Virginie marries within her family's geographic and social boundaries to someone within her nature and

to someone who would be "un successeur qui conservait *l'antique honneur* du Chat-qui-pelote" (88; emphasis added) and who continues the house traditions, religious and commercial, even after Monsieur Guillaume leaves (88). Together, Virginie and Joseph make a well-matched couple—"ce couple convenablement assorti" (89)—and in this, Virginie is guaranteed a marriage that will last "sans orages" (121), unlike her sister's.

Le Chat-qui-Pelote

Perhaps the most curious aspect of *La Maison du chat-qui Pelote* is evoked by the question of why the novel is entitled "le chat-qui-pelote." As noted above, the original title for almost thirteen years was "Gloire et Malheur." What is so significant to the second title (one that evokes the strange emblem of a cat playing tennis) that it merited a change, especially given the fact that the story's plot revolves around the rise and fall of a young bourgeois girl? In the opening paragraphs, Balzac calls the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote an artifact that belongs in a museum "bariolé d'hiéroglyphes . . . dont aucun modèle ne se verra bientôt plus à Paris" (5). When Théodore comes upon the shop and sees the sign, the "antique tableau représentant un chat qui pelotait" (8) before the frayed edifice itself, he laughs; the appearance of the shop is ancient and out of place to the point of being ludicrous. The Chat-qui-Pelote no longer has pertinence or real value in the present world, and the people within the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote are similarly risible and irrelevant to the modern world.

Almost every word in the description of the *enseigne* circumscribes the house (and, in extension, its inhabitants) to a space of the past: "vieille," "ancêtres," "antique," "pourriture," "gentilhomme," "ancienne," "couches," "successeur," "quinzième siècle," "seizième siècle" (6–9). The "champ d'azur" (8) and the gold in the sign refer to heraldry and even the meaning of the word "mignardement" (8) goes beyond its affected style, since it may refer to the old-fashioned painting style of Pierre Mignard (seventeenth century), or even to Nicolas Mignard, also painter and owner of a *jeu de paume*. Moreover, the house and the street are presented as a museum and Monsieur Guillaume, while he is a simple *drapier*, is one of the "notables *gardiens des anciens usages*" (17; emphasis added). This shows that while they are simple bourgeois, the Guillaume family is clearly linked to the past; they are living fossils preserving—be it by inertia, ignorance, or isolation in the self-contained "régime de la maison Guillaume" (44) governed by rules of inheritance and tradition—a world whose death they are not aware of, protected from modernity by the "murs menaçants" (1) of the establishment. Paradoxically, it is Théodore de Sommervieux, the aristocrat who laughs at the Chat-qui-Pelote, who represents modern France through his attitudes (acceptance of secularism and disdain for aristocracy) and also through the space he inhabits in modern Montmartre.

Though directing us to the shop and to the people within, the sign of the Chat-qui-Pelote is also significant in and of itself in understanding more fully the intrigue of the narrative. Muriel Amar explains that "the ensign [of the Cat and Racket] is prophetic of the drama; through it Balzac signals, for the first time, the incomprehension that reigns between the commercial world and the artistic world" (Amar 149) or the worlds of Augustine and Théodore, the old and the new. The cat, frazzled by time and usage with "une queue mouchetée," (Balzac, *Maison* 8) is playing *pelote* or *jeu de paume* with "un gentilhomme en habit brodé" (8). The idea that the cat's tail is *mouchetée* makes references to the ermine (an animal whose fur was used in royal clothing) and its "fourrure blanche chargée de mouchetures de sable; cet émail signifie grandeur,

autorité, [et] empire" (Saint-Allais 507). This *hermine mouchetée* is a symbol of nobility in ancient French heraldry. Thus the Chat-qui-Pelote with this "queue mouchetée" (Balzac, *Maison* 8), though a cat representing a bourgeois household instead of an ermine representing a noble household, is pointing towards a connection to the Ancien Régime and the ancient bourgeoisie that "remonte à l'époque médiévale, à laquelle Balzac ne cesse de renvoyer cette antique boutique" (Gouritin 9).

Furthermore, the game that the cat is illustrated to be playing on the sign is one played anciently and points, again, to nobility (Amar 150). It is noteworthy then that the sign of cat and racket "is placed as the primary symbol of M. Guillaume's shop and of this narrative" (16) since the merchant Guillaume's home is bourgeois not noble. However, even though the Guillaume home is of the ancient bourgeoisie and is perhaps more deeply connected to the nobility of the Ancien Régime than Théodore de Sommervieux, the consequence to the bourgeois cat playing *jeu de paume* is still serious. As Amar continues,

> le jeu de paume devient presque, à son époque, symbole d'appartenance nobilitaire . . . [et] ce jeu, pour tout ce qu'il représentait, fut si réglementé, et le Parlement "coutumier de sévérités contre ceux qui s'émancipaient au point de chercher leur plaisir dans l'exercice des nobles." (Amar 150).

For Balzac, the severity of these infringements extends to the characters of the story and, in short, the introductory appearance of the sign alludes to the heart of the narrative: the fated relationship between a bourgeois and an aristocrat.

With these inferences in mind, we look to Robert Darnton's seminal book *The Great Cat Massacre* wherein the author interprets an unusual story describing the murder of cats in Paris in the eighteenth century. These cats, killed in a worker's protest, were symbols of the bourgeois class. In recounting the narrative of how a group of print laborers rebelled against their master by killing his wife's beloved cat along with others cats owned by the master, Darnton explains the perspective of the workers: "the master loves cats, so consequently they must hate them" (Darnton 103). After the extermination of countless cats, the Madame of the house states that the "wicked men can't kill the masters, so they have killed my pussy" (104). Since Darton claims that the cats represent the bourgeois, he clarifies in this story that the workers tried the bourgeois in absentia

> Using a symbol that would let their meaning show through. . . . They tried and hanged cats . . . [and] by executing cats with such elaborate ceremony, they condemned the house and declared the bourgeois guilty . . . [and] the guilt extended from the boss to the house to the whole system . . . ridicul[ing] the entire legal and social order. (97–98, 101)

In *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, similar implications of cats and the bourgeoisie are obvious. The title of the story is then made clear when we understand that the "chat-qui-pelote" of this story is Augustine, the ancient and bourgeois *cat* of ancient rue Saint-Denis who tries her hand (through marriage to Théodore) at a figurative game of *jeu de paume* that she is not fit to play. Though Cropper states in his novel, *Playing at Monarchy: Le jeu de paume in literature of 19th-Century France*, that since Augustine "marries someone from the 'old' nobility, Théodore de Sommer*vieux*, . . . her marriage with a symbol of the past leads to her death" (Cropper 16–17),

we assert that the opposite is true. As we have seen, Balzac describes Augustine as a symbol of the ancient bourgeoisie, which means that she does not die because she marries into nobility. Indeed, she is made noble by name through marriage, but she is the one associated with a fossilized archaic world. We may say that it is not the tenets of old nobility that kill her but Theodore's "modern" nobility, one that rejects ancient ideals and pre-Revolutionary institutions and thrives in modernity. Théodore is, by choice, of a type of new nobility (similar to the duchesse de Carigliano who was defined as a "duchesse d'hier" (68), having cut himself off from the past and connected himself to the new elites, having been "nommé chevalier de la Légion-d'honneur par l'empereur" (Balzac, *Maison* 67). He plays part of Balzac's observation of the emergence of a new species in the nineteenth century that differentiates as they encounter a new environment (Blix 2). Augustine is not of this species, is unable to negate her past, and cannot, like her noble husband, transition to nor thrive in modernity. Thus, in this fated effort to succeed in a world not her own where she cannot endure as her ancient bourgeois self, Augustine, like the cats of the *The Great Cat Massacre*, is condemned and sentenced to death to purge the past.

Conclusion

In Paris, Honoré de Balzac perceives that "il y a des situations qui se représentent dans toutes les existences, des phases typiques" ("Avant-Propos" 29) and that his great œuvre, *La Comédie Humaine*, "a sa géographie comme il a sa généalogie et ses familles, ses lieux et ses choses, ses personnes et ses faits; comme il a son armorial, ses nobles et ses bourgeois, ses artisans et ses paysans, ses politiques et ses dandies, son armée, tout son monde enfin" (29). Nonetheless, in *Le Père Goriot* Balzac calls Paris a "vallée remplie de souffrances réelles, de joies souvent fausses, et si terriblement agitée qu'il faut je ne sais quoi d'exorbitant pour y produire une sensation de quelque durée" (Balzac, *Père* 7). It is in this place that Augustine is unable to endure the forces of modernity, and her eventual demise at the hands of multiple displacements within the city (never actually leaving its limits) represents Balzac's sharp contention that the past could not forever persevere in modernity. Augustine's downfall, however, is not triggered by a Rousseauist corruption from nature to civilization but by a parallel occurrence: a displacement from her natural, antiquated state in the city to another more modern state within the same city. Balzac calls her home, the maison du Chat-qui-Pelote, "une de ces maisons précieuses qui donnent aux historiens la facilité de reconstruire par analogie l'ancien Paris" (Balzac, *Maison* 5), and he therefore sees this place and the people who live there as living museums—galleries meant to display ancient features of a city that is now modern. Augustine is an object preserved and exhibited in this museum. She is the embodiment of the irrecoverable past, a relic of a pious and pre-Revolution way of life, and as such she cannot endure the modern city once she leaves the artificial and limited protection of the Chat-qui-Pelote.

Patricia Gouritin understands that "cette banale histoire de mariage entre personnes issues de deux mondes différents n'a en elle-même que peu de charmes" (Gouritin 24), and though Göran Blix would argue that the *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* simply addresses the impossibility of social mobility (Blix 2–3), it is important to understand that in Balzac's novel the source of this failed union is more than class disparities. The source is a displacement in space and time wherein Augustine's displacement in her mismatched marriage (literally and figuratively out of place in both a secular and aristocratic world) ushers in significant movement through the city which isolates her from her roots and bring her to places and people that she is

not prepared to encounter. Her decline to death shown through her failed union and displacement "reflect the sacred / secular divide violently torn open by the Revolution" (Sprenger, "Death by Marriage" 60) and thus hail to the deeper rupture that divides the Ancien Régime and modern France.

Just as the city of Paris expands and sees rapid growth in the nineteenth century, this expansion is fatal to those who have founded their identity in the Paris of the past. Jeannine Guichardet explains that Paris at this time is

> Un espace archéologique éclaté, d'où émergent quelques quartiers préservés . . . quelques maisons ou monuments-témoins comme la maison du Chat-qui-Pelote . . . [mais] elle a perdu le pouvoir de se résumer, de se reconnaître dans une 'chronique de pierre.' Morcellement fatal aux hommes: dans la poétique de la vieille balzacienne le sujet est inséparable de l'objet, et à la disparition progressive des éléments du passé correspondent, pour les êtres, une perte d'identité. (Guichardet 320)

In the world of the Chat-qui-Pelote, Augustine is herself. However, once she is ushered into Théodore's world through marriage and a move, her inability to change her identity to one that is appropriate to her new milieu destabilizes her and she is rejected by Théodore because she is not the ideal that he originally believed her to be. Yet paradoxically, she is unable to retain her original identity since she is no longer welcome in her home on the rue Saint-Denis. In this no-place, she is exiled from her family, social class, education, her husband, her past, and her present. In *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, Augustine's fatal displacements within Paris go beyond the apparent banality of the loss of a "petite bourgeoise" in the Parisian world. She a relic of the traditional past and a pre-revolutionary way of life that tries to survive in modernity and simply cannot.

We could say, in a way, that Balzac's analysis of cultural, social, and historical displacement anticipates the post-colonial discourse. Our approach differs, though, from modern postcolonialism in its specific address of the shift of the Ancien Régime to modern France. Nonetheless, while we discuss the specific phenomenon of displacement in Balzac's works of fiction, one could see the reverberations of these traumatic events in contemporary issues that have to do with other cultures and territories.[7] Leela Ghandi's idea that "postcoloniality can be described as a condition troubled by the consequences of a self-willed historical amnesis" (Ghandi 7) is foreseen in the lingering trauma and anxiety that occupies the nineteenth century. Ghandi continues by explaining that there is an important relationship between the person or nation who colonizes another person, people, or nation and the colonized themselves. In a way, the leaders of the Revolution had imposed a new "religion" with its new gods such as *la Raison* and *la Justice*, a new calendar, and a new language in their attempt to decompose what was left of the Ancien Regime (Hunt). Yet, similar to the case of colonialism, a total disintegration was not possible. The residues of the past continued to disrupt and haunt the new power that was trying to establish itself on the ruins of the old world. Now more than two centuries after the Revolution, modern France and the *vieille* France still struggle to acknowledged their "reciprocal behavior" (Ghandi 11). The vehemence of recent debates about marriage in France may prove that some old wounds have not yet healed and the dialogue between the two worlds remains difficult. In *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote,* Balzac not only examines the failure of a *mésalliance* and the disaster of social and cultural displacement, but also predicts the tragic

misunderstandings, awkward compromises, and persistent incompatibilities implied by the dialogue between the worlds that define themselves as opposites of each other and yet cannot exist separately.

Notes

[1] Göran Blix states that Balzac's works "offer an exhaustive description of the various social species that peopled nineteenth-century France" (Blix 2).

[2] The Goriot daughters are also displaced to the city since they are from the same origins as their father. Nonetheless, they are able to adapt to Paris and even embrace the rigors of Parisian life, unlike their father.

[3] Balzac is not the only nineteenth-century author who crafts characters who experience death by displacement. Later on in the period, authors such as Émile Zola and Alexandre Dumas compose narratives (Zola's *Nana* and Dumas' *La Dame aux camélias*) where their characters die after they are displaced to Paris. Zola and Dumas, like Balzac, see Paris as a place of corruption that is in conflict with the pureness of the rural and center their attention on the social and moral environments of the city. It is thus significant to observe a similar theme of death by displacement in Paris in their narratives as in those of Balzac.

In Zola's *Nana*, the famous Parisian prostitute, Nana, is a Paris native (like Colonel Chabert) and is at ease living in the city. The city is Nana's playground where she is known and desired by many men. One man, who is about to watch her perform, affirms, "Depuis ce matin, on m'assomme avec Nana. J'ai rencontré plus de vingt personnes, et Nana par-ci, et Nana par-là" (Zola 8), and at her show the text tells us that the city is at her fingertips—"Paris était là" (23). However, "devant [un] réveil navré de Paris, elle se trouvait prise d'un attendrissement de jeune fille, d'un besoin de campagne, d'idylle, de quelque chose de doux et blanc" (221–22), and Nana decides to leave Paris to sojourn in the country. It is in the country that she seems to be purified from her Parisian depravity since "elle croyait avoir quitté Paris depuis vingt ans, . . . éprouvait des choses qu'elle ne savait pas, . . . et elle tomba en vierge" (319, 321). However, her return to Paris, a displacement from newfound virtue to the nefarious nature of the city where smallpox is rampant (Lanskin 117) is a return to her ensuing death.

Similar to Nana, Alexandre Dumas presents Marguerite in *La Dame aux camélias* as a *demi-mondaine* and mistress to many. However, she is persuaded by her love for Armand Duval, a provincial bourgeois, to leave her Parisian life and lifestyle as a prostitute. She leaves to live with him in Auteuil, in the country. Armand explains that over time in the country "la courtisane y disparaissait peu à peu" and that Marguerite becomes "la plus chaste fiancée" clothed in a white dress (Dumas 287), symbolic of purity. However, their idyllic life in the country is interrupted when Armand's father is apprised of the relationship and convinces Marguerite to leave and return to Paris. Upon her arrival back to Paris, Marguerite "croyant qu'Armand ne l'aimera plus jamais, se laisse entraîner dans un tourbillon suicidaire" (Lanskin 110). The author expresses that "elle ne dort presque plus, elle court les bals, elle soupe, elle se grise même . . . après un souper, elle est restée huit jours au lit; et quand le médecin lui a permis de se lever, elle a recommencé" (Dumas 387). Soon after, she is "morte jeune et belle" (450) in Paris. In an ending that is remarkably parallel to that of Nana's, Marguerite's return to Paris triggers her death, and it is evident that "Paris s'oppose radicalement à la campagne" (Lanskin 118) since it is a contradiction to the symbolic purity embodied in the rural.

[4] The Thebaid or Thebais, a desert region in ancient Egypt, became a place of retreat for Christian hermits around the fifth century and is associated with prayer and withdrawal from the world.

[5] In reference to his explanation for the influence that home can have on an individual's development and memory, Gaston Bachelard writes in his *Poetics of Space*, "Bien entendu, grâce à la maison, un grand nombre de nos souvenirs sont logés et si la maison se complique un peu, si elle a cave et grenier, des coins et des couloirs, nos souvenirs ont des refuges de mieux en mieux caractérisés. Nous y retournons toute notre vie en nos rêveries" (Bachelard 36).

[6] As Scott Sprenger explains in his article, "Le Cousin Pons", "ou l'anthropologie balzacienne du gout," when the sacred nature of marriage is displaced and changed (as it was post Revolution) it causes tragedy. For Pons, in Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons*,

> [Ses] goûts manifestes et lisibles [de Pons] à l'époque postrévolutionnaire . . . sont des *symptômes* d'une "pensée" catholique d'Ancien Régime qui lui a été inculquée: le mariage sacré qui unit deux âmes et deux chairs en une seule, et qui par la grâce unit de manière transcendante le désir érotique et le désir spirituel. Puisque cette "pensée" s'avère obsolète et inopérante dans le contexte moderne où Pons tente de

> l'exprimer, et puisque Pons semble incapable d'en démordre, cette pensée devient la source de ses dérives affectives. (*Le Cousin Pons* 20)

For Pons, the displacement of the sacred institution causes him to pursue "des obsessions '"étranges'" et incontrôlables . . . [pour pouvoir] trouver des substituts immanents et donc inadéquats à son désir d'idéal absolu" (20).

[7] The violent infliction of a new Western world on local populations has proved disastrous in the twentieth century in a way similar to the imposition of a severely new system and way of life was after the French Revolution in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century France. In the vein of post-colonial discourse, contemporary anthropologist Akhil Gupta strikes a chord that resonates with Balzac's portrayal of fatal displacement in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*. Gupta states that "it is not only the displaced who experience a displacement [for] even people remaining in familiar and ancestral places find the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changes, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture broken" (Gupta 10). In Balzac's novel, each member of the Guillaume family experiences a change, or displacement, in their relationship to their home even though it is only Augustine who dies directly from this change. However, it is true that Balzac's representation of displacement in his novels is often that the effects of these changes in time and space are more extreme—causations that lead the displaced who cannot transition to death.