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Improbable Grief: Mavrikakis' Onomastic Practices of Memorialization

JULIE ROBERT

Catherine Mavrikakis', *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* (2000), begins with a morbid consideration of probability: "J'apprends de la mort de mes amis comme d'autres découvrent que leur billet de loterie n'est toujours pas gagnant. Cette semaine, j'ai encore perdu un Hervé, et statistiquement, c'était prévisible puisque tous mes amis s'appellent Hervé et sont, pour la plupart, séropositifs" (13).¹

Despite the narrator's sardonic musings on likelihood, a recurrent theme in a novel peppered with references to gambling, statistics and games of double or nothing, Mavrikakis' premise is doubtful, provocatively so.

The prospect of a clustering of Hervés in Montreal in a group defined by what was only a short time before an immanently fateful serostatus defies believability. *Hervé* is hardly the most common of given names; France's Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques reports that one was approximately 5.5 times more likely to be named *Philippe* than *Hervé* had one been born in 1961, the year of Mavrikakis' birth. The odds according to Quebec's Index Santé tip ever more against *Hervé* if one were to have been born in Quebec. The unlikelihood of the situation in real life and the equally curious notion that an author would call so many of her characters—most of them HIV-positive, dead or dying—by the same name notwithstanding, *Deuils* is overrun with Hervés.

In a fragmentary novel largely devoid of plot, timeline or character development, the reader becomes singularly entangled in a process of making sense of the proliferation of Hervés. This task is at once semiotic and mathematical, for bewildered readers are likely to find themselves trying to determine how many Hervés there are and questioning the author's unusual choice, including the rationale for that particular name. In

response to the mathematical question, the novel's 59 unnumbered chapters, feature approximately two dozen Hervés, although the precise number cannot be determined even by the most attentive and laborious re-readings. As for the semiotic question, answers arise from self-consciously referenced debates in literary and cultural criticism that speak to conventions around names and characterisation.

Where *Deuils'* narrator, a literature professor named Catherine, appears to be a fictionalised version of the author herself, Mavrikakis' own scholarship on Hervé Guibert provides a key for understanding her debut novel. Mavrikakis publicly credits Guibert, a French writer whose documenting of his own death from AIDS in the early 1990s accorded him career-defining levels of fame, as an inspiration. She published extensively on his works, including analyses of the onomastic conventions he employed. I contend that *Deuils* is an extension of Mavrikakis' earlier critical work on the significance of naming and onomastic reproduction, specifically in relation to AIDS as experienced and chronicled in the years before the widespread adoption of life-sustaining antiretroviral therapies in the late 1990s. A tragic hallmark of this period was the epidemic quality of the disease, which resulted in high infection and mortality rates.

Deuils hyperbolically replicates Guibert's use of subversive onomastic practices as metaphor for the disease and in so doing provocatively abandons generic conventions relating to names. Working through fictocriticism, a form of "generically transgressive writing, which blurs the defining lines between fiction/creative writing and critical/theoretical texts" (Flavell 3), Mavrikakis enrolls her reader into an experience of reading where they are compelled to try to attribute specificity to characters that, through their seemingly ever-multiplying numbers, become only barely distinguishable from one another. The reader is drawn into futile attempts to make sense of the Hervés—at once distinct and frustratingly similar, unexpected and predictable—that accumulate with every chapter. The text accordingly evokes rather than just represents the collective toll of HIV/AIDS and gives readers a limited but important access to the foreboding that is characteristic of being witness to an epidemic. *Deuils* thus functions as a "fictional contribution to non-fictional debates" (Haas 14), notably the imperatives of memorialization at a time when the disease's epidemic realities were just beginning to recede and the significance of the crisis, including as lived experience, risked being forgotten by future generations.

Onomastic Differentiation: Critical Perspectives

Mavrikakis's fictocritical approach is situated within a tradition of writing, predominantly by women, in Quebec that fuses creative styles and scholarly perspectives. Having begun in the late 1970s with Nicole Brossard's *fiction-théorique*, perhaps the archetype of this style, the hybrid-genre of creative and critical writing manipulates formal, generic and linguistic conventions to create space for voices and propositions outside of established forms and codes that have been defined and dominated by some to the exclusion of others. Karpinski encapsulates *fiction théorique*, as a genre in its own right "which has been adopted by feminist critics to describe the syncretic ability of women's writing to deconstruct traditional representation while also creating texts transforming the codes of gender, genre, language and self" (911). Mavrikakis' formal and stylistic innovation in *Deuils* is subtler than that of the more poetically inclined authors in this tradition, which includes not only Brossard, but others including France Théoret and Louise Dupré. Arguably, this is because her critical intervention hinges almost entirely on the name and its presumed literary function in relation to characterisation.

"Drawing attention to generic conventions through breaking their rules" (Flavell 35) is a textual strategy that is often in service of politically engaged projects. Ross Chambers argues that there is a transgressive quality to witnessing texts, including AIDS narratives, and that this subversion of generic and other expectations functions strategically to "have the story attended to or, in the strong sense of the word, heard" (*Untimely Interventions* xx). Monique Wittig's analysis of the Proustian *roman à clef* and its onomastic puzzles similarly highlights the political potential of deviating from established literary forms, especially in relation to the games of identity that are so often predicated on names. Wittig, herself a fictocritical writer, contends that literary texts can surreptitiously be turned into war machines, as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, when words are used materially or non-referentially:

For in literature, history, I believe, intervenes at the individual and subjective level and manifests itself in the particular point of view of the writer. It is then one of the most vital and strategic parts of the writer's task to universalize this point of view . . . reality [though] cannot be directly transferred from the consciousness to the book. The universalization of each point of view demands a particular

attention to the formal elements that can be open to history, such as themes, subjects of narratives, as well as the global form of the work.
(49)

Deuils' unconventional onomastic practices, where names do both more and less than identify characters, can therefore be considered tactics of critical import, for they allow readers to access the author's point of view.

One of the basic tenets of narrative fiction is that characters bear different names or designations (nicknames, titles, the combinations of given names and surnames, familial ordinals, regnal numbers, etc.) to help the reader distinguish them from one another. The notable exception are family narratives, often with a focus on multiple generations, as is the case in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where characters are given the same names to signify continuity between family members, including from one generation to the next. In such texts, naming conventions, either implicitly or explicitly, constitute part of the story being told. Nevertheless, the onomastic similarity in even these exceptional texts—as in real life—is generally treated in such a way that characters are still able to be distinguished from one another. Versions of a name or sufficient qualifications (physical descriptions, references to their personal history, occupation, etc.) are included to allow for meaningful disambiguation.

Instances of multiple characters having the same name can nonetheless be, as Susan Suleiman notes of Robbe-Grillet, strategic challenges or subversions of generic conventions:

In Robbe-Grillet's novels, for example, we know that a single name can designate, without any realistic motivation, a series of characters who are not the 'same'. This constitutes a play on the redundancies [that] . . . can in turn be considered as part of the code: the specific code (corresponding to the idiolect in linguistics) which regulates the novels of Robbe-Grillet. (132)

Beyond Robbe-Grillet, the cases of Bobby Watson in Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, similarly emphasise the provocative and transgressive potential of giving multiple characters the same name and failing to provide readers with sufficient means to distinguish them from one another. Even in such cases though, there is often a plausible rationale within the story, for instance familial ties via marriage or descent, for the characters having the same name.

Mavrikakis allusively gestures to the provocative narratological potential an author can introduce via play with names in an exchange between Catherine and one of the many Hervés, this one a professional nemesis. He is introduced in a sarcastically dismissive way as a fellow literary scholar, who both studies Balzac and modelled his own forays into creative writing upon the 19th century author:

Il [Hervé] me raconta brièvement ce qu'il faisait, vomit sur mes intérêts théoriques et me déclara que lui était un érudit. Titre auquel je n'eus pas le droit. Pour lui, j'étais une fille à la mode, qui passerait, qui se prostituait à la théorie du moment. Lui serait un monument du siècle. L'érection de son époque. Il venait d'écrire un roman et s'identifiait alors à Balzac, qu'il admirait plus que tout et sur lequel il préparait une thèse énorme, non comparable à la merde que je venais moi de soutenir quelque cinq ans plus tôt. (141)

For a literature professor like Catherine (and a scholar like Mavrikakis), Balzac's significance as both object of intellectual fascination and literary inspiration establishes clear lines of intellectual and creative demarcation. The conventionality of the 19th century author's stance on characters and naming had been upbraided by none other than Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman*:

Nous en a-t-on assez parlé du « personnage » ! Et ça ne semble, hélas, pas près de finir . . . Pour justifier le bien-fondé de ce point de vue, on utilise le raisonnement habituel : Balzac nous a laissé Le Père Goriot. . . . Un personnage, tout le monde sait ce que le mot signifie . . . Un personnage doit avoir un nom propre, double si possible : nom de famille et prénom. Il doit avoir des parents, une hérédité. Il doit avoir une profession. (26–27)

Where Catherine positions herself as the anti-Hervé and *Deuils'* narrator functions as an analogue of Mavrikakis herself, there is an implicit scorn for the artlessness of the clearly defined and named character.

In practice, *Deuils* echoes Catherine's distance from Balzacian convention and divorces name from character, for the Hervés resist differentiation from one another. Only two of *Deuils'* similarly named characters are noted as having surnames. The remaining Hervés must be identified using an eclectic range of personal details: ages, occupations, events from their personal histories, and even circumstances of their deaths. Except where the details are mutually exclusive identifiers—the Hervé who died in his sleep at the age of 23 (93) cannot be the Hervé who committed suicide by

hanging himself from his home gym equipment (113)—Mavrikakis does little to dispel the confusion, even where readers are attentively tracking such details. This onomastic impenetrability is the way in which Mavrikakis announces her fictocritical project.

If the proliferation of Hervés is what alerts the reader to Mavrikakis' critical undertaking, the semiotic implications of this moniker must also be considered. In contrast to the intergenerational explanations for many similarly named characters in other works, *Deuils* does little to illuminate why Mavrikakis chose *Hervé*. There is no apparent intradiegetic rationale for the choice, as almost all the Hervés are people the narrator had encountered throughout her lifetime of social, professional, familial and everyday interactions. With few exceptions, the Hervés are not connected to one another and where they are linked, for instance the case of two Hervés being a couple (44), their pairing is (at least within the logics of the fiction) purely accidental. The onomastic anomaly therefore neither advances the plot nor contributes to character development. Indeed, this absurd coincidence is scarcely considered, only noted in passing in remarks that confirm the novel's dark humour.

Of the two Hervés endowed with surnames, Hervé-Pierre Laroque (184), appears to be an entirely fictionalized acquaintance of Catherine's who had, predictably, passed away. The other, however, is Hervé Guibert (21), the well-known French author who came to prominence in 1990 following the publication of *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. *À l'ami* is what Ross Chambers classifies as an AIDS diary, a text written about the experience of AIDS in the often very short interval between diagnosis and death. This text, along with Guibert's *Le Protocol compassionnel* (1991) and the posthumous *Cytomégalovirus* (1992), provided the French public with a first intimate and unflinching account of AIDS at the height of what was routinely characterized as an epidemic. Yet it was Guibert's coded identification/outing of an already deceased Michel Foucault as *Muzil* (and to a lesser extent actress Isabelle Adjani as *Marine*) that made the novel, seen by many to be a scandalous and inappropriate *roman à clef*, a newsworthy publication and earned Guibert the opprobrium of the French press.

Writing about *romans à clef*, but arguably in a way that is generalizable to any text that foregrounds onomastic practices that traverse fiction and real life, Marie-Paule Berranger argues that readers must look to the extra-textual "supports" to understand the narrative: "Suivre l'histoire, c'est en suivre deux à la fois, mener double vie, conduire une enquête dans les paratextes, solliciter les souvenirs de contemporains, les documents histor-

iques et témoignages d'époque . . ." (115). Berranger's assertion that paratext is the key to works that double as onomastic puzzles invites readers to investigate, especially in an age of instantaneous online searches, Mavrikakis' links to Guibert.

Such a search would quickly send the curious reader to Mavrikakis' scholarly publications on Guibert, a trove of paratext that is referenced within the story itself in Catherine's comments to (yet another) Hervé: "Tu m'avais dit que tu serais vieux un jour. Peut-être l'as-tu été, dans cette vieillesse que confère la maladie et dont parlait Hervé Guibert peu avant sa mort. Lisais-tu Hervé Guibert? Sais-tu que depuis des années je travaille sur lui? Bien sûr que c'était pour toi, même si je ne connaissais rien de ton sida" (*Deuils* 21). Catherine's allusions to "her" own scholarship as she definitively names Guibert and foregrounds his illness not only confirm his importance, but also direct readers to the paratextual key within Mavrikakis' publications. Therein, they will find studies of madness, illness, contamination and grief—including in Guibert's AIDS writing. Tellingly, Mavrikakis' scholarship includes a focus on how Guibert used onomastic play to both reveal and mask the realities of AIDS for him and those around him.

A Dreaded Accumulation of Hervés

Like her literary alter-ego, Mavrikakis is forthright about her admiration for Guibert. In a 2017 Radio-Canada interview, she speaks of Guibert's power as an author: "Guibert s'est permis d'écrire sur tout, il est capable de trahir les gens, de parler de son sida avec vraiment grande malchance envers lui-même. Guibert, c'est la permission d'écrire sur tout, c'est le droit de la parole dans l'écriture et c'est aussi le pouvoir de la littérature." She credits him with paving the way for her own writing, launching what has since become a redoubtable career as a novelist, and for allowing her to express her grief at having lost a number of friends and colleagues to AIDS.

As a scholar, Mavrikakis ventured that Guibert's frequent use of acronyms, aliases and abbreviations to designate people, places and objects was "une stratégie du secret" ("Le Sida" 146). This is because his onomastic play both obfuscates easy reference, and also because he uses this device to cast doubt on the accuracy of his own pseudonymized identifications. In Guibert's allusions she finds an "invitation au décodage tout en étant une mise en garde contre [ce] qui peut conduire à une mauvaise interprétation. Le narrataire est convié à rétablir le sens mais aussi à se méfier des inscrip-

tions de Guibert” (“Le Sida” 149). In what will, given *Deuils*’s frustrating use of names, appear to be an almost prophetic appraisal of Guibert’s work, she argues that names invite semiotic interpretation but also undermine the reader’s efforts to ascribe meaning to them.

Mavrikakis also attributes to Guibert’s writing a certain preoccupation with the doubling of his own name. She recognizes his musings on his sister’s decision to name her newborn son Hervé (*À L’ami* 69–70) and a character in *Cytomégalo*virus identified using the author’s own initials, H.G., as Guibert’s means of signifying reproduction or proliferation. Yet, owing to the omnipresence of the multiplying HIV virus within his body, the designation also metaphorizes the continual presence or threat of death: “cette répétition du nom cache le nom comme abréviation, sida, cryptogramme à déchiffrer. Dans un texte truffé de sigles, comment ne pas entendre l’abréviation R. V. dans Hervé (qui d’ailleurs fait écho à celle de retrovirus)” (Mavrikakis (“Le Sida” 148–49). The proliferation of Hervés in *Deuils* is therefore not without precedent; Mavrikakis’ doubling of the name Hervé replicates what Guibert has done, as though the literary device had spread like the virus she argues it represents.

In contrast to what Mavrikakis sees in Guibert’s texts, where the multiplication of Hervés is emblematic of the pathological process, the abundance of Hervés in *Deuils* defies metaphorical explanation. Each successive Hervé enters the narrative not so much as a distinct character with an identity relevant to the story, but merely as yet another in Catherine’s life who shares a similar fate. The fourth Hervé (who appears in the third chapter) for instance, is said to have died as a result of a terror attack in the London Underground:

Cela fait neuf ans aujourd’hui qu’Hervé est mort déchiqueté dans un attentat dans le métro londonien. Il n’est rien resté de son corps, rien du tout, puisque la bombe était placée précisément sous son siège . . . Hervé était sûrement dans le metro à cinq heures quarante-cinq, ce 31 octobre 1991. (29)

The pretensions to factual accuracy aside (no such attack took place on that date), the identity of the victim, in some ways identified so clearly, is a matter of conjecture. Was this Hervé, victim of a terrorist attack, one of the Hervés evoked at other points in the text? Was he one of the myriad HIV positive Hervés as well—one whose death from disease was foreclosed by a violent end—or simply another deceased acquaintance who was, coincidentally, also named Hervé?

The fifth Hervé, a former actor turned director (or possibly playwright), died of an opportunistic infection on the 18th of June 1989 (32). The sixth Hervé, who comes into the story in the following chapter, is described as somebody who wanted to give meaning to his own death and enlisted the narrator to help him in the task. Only later and by comparing the dates of death, can the reader determine that what were initially thought to be Hervés #5 and #6 are more than likely the same person: “C’est d’ailleurs Hervé, le grand amour d’Hervé, qui m’annonça, le 18 juin à onze heures du matin, la mort d’Hervé” (44). The Hervé from chapter 6 is therefore likely to be Hervé #5’s long-time partner—although the deceased may indeed be an altogether different Hervé who died on the same date: an absurdity that is nonetheless plausible in this context of *Deuils*’ acknowledged odds-defying coincidences.

A reader looking to make sense of Mavrikakis’ narrative may turn from a general interpretive task—understanding who each of the Hervés is—to a purely mathematical one: tallying just how many Hervés there are. To put the improbability of this need in perspective, Yannick Rochat’s computational analysis of the 20 sizeable tomes that make up Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series reveals that there are six characters named Rose. *Deuils*’ modest page count of fewer than 200, however, contains approximately two dozen Hervés. The ambiguities in characterisation, however, make it impossible to discern exactly how many Hervés there are. Is Hervé #25, somebody with whom Catherine had a falling out (127), the same as Hervé #1 (18) whom she had not spoken to in some time? Is Hervé, the new friend (171), Hervé #21 or a reference to an anterior Hervé? Is the wealthy Hervé whom Catherine cared for in his most vulnerable hour (161–63) Hervé #20 or one of any of the others? As the Hervés meld into one another, the elements that would serve to identify them generate illusions of difference and echoes of similarity. As in Mavrikakis’ analysis of Guibert’s writings, her onomastic choices compel the reader to try to make sense of the links between names and characters—and arguably to people and circumstances outside of the fiction. At the same time, though, these formal and stylistic interventions preclude any confidence in being able to know who or what is being referenced.

Mavrikakis’ lack of identifying detail would be unremarkable, or at the very least less obvious, were the characters to have been given different names. Undoubtedly, the story would still be tragic, even morbid, owing to the sheer number of reported deaths, most of them from AIDS. Still, it would have been more in line with representations—literary and non—of

other tragedies, even epidemics. The names of the deceased would accumulate in the pages of a novel like they would on monuments and memorials, as a way to evidence the human toll. Her unusual choice nonetheless functions as an intertextual reference to a body of scholarship (her own) that invests this particular name and its proliferation in literary projects (Guibert's) that she interprets as concerned with "le deuil de soi" ("Le Sida" 29). The name *Hervé* is therefore inextricably linked to grief and mourning in the context of AIDS.

Dreadful Statistics

In Mavrikakis' text, the name *Hervé* is bound up with the realities of HIV/AIDS referenced in Guibert's writing: a short interval between diagnosis and death, a lack of effective treatments, uncertainty, political ignorance about the nature and extent of the problem, and high rates of both infection and fatality, especially among gay men. *Deuils*, however, was written at a time when the epidemiological and cultural context of HIV/AIDS was changing. What had been consciously characterised as the "AIDS epidemic" was by the late 1990s abating thanks to the general availability (at least in the affluent West) of highly active antiretroviral therapies. The previously fast-acting terminal diagnoses became chronic diseases and through a combination of better preventative strategies and more effective therapies, the overall number and rate of deaths decreased. These medical advances changed how the *Hervés* of the world would personally experience the disease. They also altered how the *Catherines*, whose proximal experiences to it were also in flux, would apprehend and represent the disease's effects.

Chronicles such as Guibert's, document AIDS-induced decline, both the author's own and that of others, and the decimation of communities. In relation to such texts, Chambers argues for a critical ethics predicated on the inevitability of the diarist's death: "the critic as reader is charged with a function of mourning, with respect to dead authors, while the critic as writer is in a position to furnish the relay function on which the continuation of the witnessing projects, by virtue of their inevitably deferred character, depends" (*Facing It* 129). The critic's function *vis-à-vis* AIDS diaries is one of both mourning and carrying on the witnessing project. For the witnesses to the epidemic, people like Catherine—a queer woman who cared for at least one of the *Hervés* in his dying days, an aspect of the trauma to be remembered and relayed was the experience of frequent loss.

“Phone calls that bring bad news” (Chambers *Untimely Interventions* vii) and almost routinized funeral attendance are just as much a part of HIV/AIDS testimonial writing as descriptions of symptoms.

As therapeutic advances changed the epidemic qualities of HIV/AIDS, chronicles like Guibert’s gave way to survival narratives. By 2004, prominent critics such as Rosenberg and Chambers had already identified a shift toward an “aftermath” mentality that indicated both an affective and temporal distance from HIV/AIDS as it had previously been experienced. Claire Decoteau argues that this distance produced “a kind of cultural forgetfulness [wherein] The overwhelming silence that has engulfed the pandemic in recent years, along with the scientific discourses of rationality and control, all serve to erase the history of the epidemic” (241). At the time of *Deuils’* publication, however, the paradigm had not yet shifted. In this interstice the experiences and the losses, including the denials that prevented concerted public health intervention and therefore contributed to the epidemic, were still present. Yet, the urgency and the accompanying affect of the epidemic mentality was already beginning to fade.

Preventing the erasure occasioned by an event’s aftermath is part of the memorial impetus. Memorials are accordingly designed to endure, often as tangible objects, as a form of testimony. In the case of a mass tragedies, memorials often bear the names of individuals to retain a focus on the human element and to illustrate, via accumulation, the effect that can all too easily be rendered as a simple statistic. War memorials with neat columns of names, each one representing one of the fallen, are common examples of the genre. This was the impetus behind the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a now 54-ton artefact composed of contributed patches that are stitched together into blocks that Catherine and partner Olga travelled to Washington DC to see (107). The aptly designated NAMES Project Foundation, the custodian of the quilt, explains that it “became a vehicle to visually illustrate the numbers lost to the AIDS epidemic as well as a tool to bring names to statistics, to humanize the devastation and threat of AIDS.” In this account of the Quilt’s function, names, each represented on a patch uniquely crafted by those who lost someone significant to them, are the humanizing factor that contrast with both the abstractness of a statistic and the accumulation that contributes to the number.

The significance of these memorials is nonetheless also temporally bound to a specific era. Removed from that point in time, their ability to convey the affect that occasioned their commissioning or enactment is dulled. Rosenberg accordingly argues that AIDS memorials that bear the

names of the deceased derive their testimonial power from a relationship between the living and the dead and that this power can fade with time: “When the names do not mark for the living a previously known or loved person, they risk becoming not so distinct from the very unapproachable, untouchable, numbers that they are hoped to give embodied texture to” (6). In both Rosenberg’s comments and the NAMES Project Foundation’s explanation, names are the uniquely humanizing factor, numbers that which anonymize and keep the dead at an ever-receding distance.

Deuils’ matter of fact commentary on the number of dying Hervés and seemingly callous quips about “La mort à coups de statistiques” (13) suggests that it fails in its representational obligations to relay the experiences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and to humanize them. The scant character development and first-person narration denies the Hervés a richness of characterisation akin to that normally evoked in personal memorials or tributes, like the patches of the AIDS Quilt. Despite being named, the Hervés are so anonymised that they fade into one another. This, however, is the crux of Mavrikakis’ fictocritical project. For a reader to definitively identify and count the Hervés’ attempt to ascertain the scope of the loss each new mention of a Hervé may represent, proves to be an impossible task, but one that keeps the specificity of each individual in constant focus. This is because Mavrikakis’ use of a single name for the majority of her characters prevents the forgettable, affectless statistics from being generated. The attempt, the likely response to the novel’s provocative onomastic practices, nonetheless forces the reader to attend to the minutest of details in Mavrikakis’ characterisation. The numbers therefore become appreciable only in relation to the uniqueness of the individuals. Mavrikakis, ever-attuned to the risks of erasure in collective memorialization, forecloses the possibility of rendering names into numbers. The critical witnessing task of relaying a sense of literally incalculable loss in the waning of the epidemic is accordingly, and counter to expectations, performed.

Mavrikakis, moreover, fulfils the witnessing imperative by using the accumulating, all but anonymous Hervés to evoke for readers the epidemic’s experience of unrelenting loss. Where Catherine’s initial warning that she loses a Hervé as often as she fails to win the lottery is likely to be taken as hyperbole, the reader soon discovers that every page threatens to bring another Hervé. The slowness of the narrative form and the time it takes to read, encounter and experience each iteration of the name builds narrative tension. Once the immanence of the threat is confirmed, reading becomes mired in foreboding. As the Hervés accumulate, the reader’s sense of dis-

belief becomes palpable. Each Hervé on the page sees its barest materiality—presence—overshadow its references.

In bringing the reader to experience the rich signifier of *Hervé* affectively rather than as only a prompt for sense-making, in this case in both the semiotic and mathematical senses, Mavrikakis exercises the critic's relay function at the transitional point in AIDS' epidemiological and cultural history. Severing the conventional link between character and name, the name loses what Wittig calls its "everyday meaning" (47) to instead become a word with unconventional meaning and arguably critical effect. In Mavrikakis' hands, and harkening back to Wittig's thesis, the word/name in question temporarily loses its referential and even its metaphorical function to instead allow itself to "be read in [its] materiality" (47). The materiality of the word/name—its repeated and unexpected presence—has a performative, attention-getting effect that makes the experience of reading emotionally charged, for the reader both guards against and resigns themselves to the likelihood of another Hervé. The weary preparedness for yet another Hervé, the signifier of yet another death from a fatal epidemic, becomes, following Wittig's argument about literature's power to become a war machine, evidence that the author succeeded in their literary and critical, and arguably political and ideological, project of universalizing their perspective. Mavrikakis uses a single name to both represent and elicit what it feels like to live through an epidemic.

Conclusion

In the self-reflexive and generically challenging narrative traditions of both testimony and fictocriticism, *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* puts to its readers an argument, a thesis: those who experienced AIDS as an epidemic had to contend with both the grief attached to individual deaths and the devastation of losing so many. This dual mourning, characteristic of an earlier epidemiological and cultural time, a time chronicled in the works of Hervé Guibert, can be represented in memorial practices that rely on both names and numbers. The affective and experiential realities of those circumstances are nonetheless largely out of reach for all but those who lived them.

Mavrikakis, however, takes up what Chambers argues is the critic's duty *vis-à-vis* AIDS diarists to relay the (even temporary) survivor's dread about the deaths that always threatened to occur. Making the normally cold and impersonal statistics evocative by putting the reader in the uncomfortable

and ultimately impossible position of having to tally the seemingly ever-recurrent Hervés, she causes attention to rest on the facets that made these identically-named characters unique. Far more than simply being or adding up to nameless mortality statistics then, the Hervés each demand extraordinary attention and the reader is duly engaged in a form of reading that actively memorializes individuals and humanizes the group.

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Notes

1. All references to *Deuils cannibals et mélancoliques* will hereafter feature only the page number.

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