

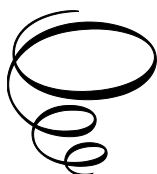
Entanglement
and Entropy
in Claire Messud's
Novels

Entanglement and Entropy in Claire Messud's Novels

Edited by

Sandra Singer

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For Daniel, as ever

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Fig. 6.1 The doubled image of Edie Sedgwick in *Outer and Inner Space*
Andy Warhol, *Outer and Inner Space*, 1965

16mm film, black-and-white, sound, 66 minutes or 33 minutes in double screen

© The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved.

Fig. 6.2 Joseph Cornell, *Toward the Blue Peninsula (for Emily Dickinson)*, 1953

14.5 x 10.25 x 5.5 cm.

© The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS) / SOCAN (2021)

Fig. 6.3 Alice Neel, Andy Warhol, 1970

Oil and acrylic on linen, Overall: 60 x 40 in. (152.4 x 101.6 cm.)

© 2021 Digital image Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala

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INTRODUCTION

THE WEAVE OF CLAIRE MESSUD'S REALISM

The rhythm of my literary breath, of my understanding of the world, of my writing experience, is the rhythm of the novel.¹

Literature, certainly, has largely seen a return to a realm of signifying consensus: some version of recognizable human realism is the norm.²

Messud's Lived Experience Reflected in Textual Character Development

Through her novel writing, American fiction author, essayist and Harvard University English professor Claire Messud explores the embodied contingency of lived experience. Namely, personal events in lived experience are connected, but not necessarily causally related, fated or predetermined. Further, contingent lived experience is impacted by geography, history, politics, philosophy and culture. Her essay, "A Home from Home: Boston's Museum of Fine Arts" mentions various sociocultural and historical influences. To "a French father, a Canadian mother, and the only American passport in the family,"³ she might add that her father and paternal grandparents were French Algerian born; as well during her university studies at the University of Cambridge, she met her spouse, professor and critic James Wood. From her beginning novel *When the World Was Steady* (1994), through the characters' interactions and adjustments to change, intricately worked fiction displays intimate, cosmopolitan affiliations. Human attachments located precisely in time and space, *primarily between women or girls*, set in motion calamities that are often misapprehended by the characters, but due to Messud's subtle and deft

¹ Claire Messud, quoted in "Chapter One: Interview with Claire Messud by Sandra Singer" in this volume.

² Messud, "Marlene Dumas," in *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write: An Autobiography in Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 272.

³ Messud, "A Home from Home: Boston's Museum of Fine Arts," in *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*, 293–94.

irony, perhaps not by the reader.

Messud's characters, such as Nora Eldridge in *The Woman Upstairs* (2013), strive to escape the postmodern, narcissistic Fun House of mirrors they see as contemporary sociocultural experience, in order to ground existence in encounters they view as part of "Real Life."⁴ However, unlike the narrator Nora, who asserts at the beginning of the novel her conclusion: "I've finally come to understand that life itself is the Fun House,"⁵ Messud's bias is towards 'the real.' Considering the tension between virtual and arguably more tangible lived experience, Messud forcefully makes the point: "In this internet age, in which fantasy seems bafflingly to have attained the status of a new reality, let it be reiterated: actual reality is intractably, awfully, and profoundly real; and actual facts are the record of that intractable reality. Not to grasp this is to succumb to a potentially fatal ethical corruption of the soul."⁶ Her essay collection, *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write: An Autobiography in Essays* (2020) makes the implications of this assertion clear as Messud attributes hers and others' cultural and philosophical insights having direct and gripping consequences for the processes of living. In a similar manner Messud's characters get caught up with both stirring virtual and 'real' events leading to changed circumstances, which are graspable as an effect of the precise configuration of a relational network of contributing factors.

Messud's Early Literary Production and Interpretative Literary Criticism

The title for my collection of essays, *Entanglement and Entropy in Claire Messud's Novels* captures a networked dynamic at play in the fiction. Entanglement raises unexpected challenges for the characters, resulting in alterations of the self—including, but not always, potentially self-liberating personal growth that requires removing blinders from eyes that misconstrue experience, in order to perceive and expose determining sociohistorical and cultural factors. Adolescents or generally, by comparison, the younger generation in Messud's novels seem to show the most potential for transformation. Through a mental reflexive, excavating process, comparatively younger characters such as Emmy or Virginia Simpson or Max Sparke in

⁴ Messud, *The Woman Upstairs* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2014), 5.

⁵ Messud, 5.

⁶ Messud, "Mother's Knee," in *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*, 65.

the first novel, *When the World Was Steady*, can at least envision opportunities other than and beyond the bounded parameters (and resulting entanglements) set by their parents' original community. Yet on first consideration, Messud's debut novel may read like an exotic travelogue, with its characters journeying to distinct climes, including the island of Bali and the Scottish Isle of Skye.

Messud's family history includes much geographical movement, such as her paternal grandfather's work as consular attaché in the French Navy during WW II⁷ and her father's family's French Algerian *pied-noir* identities. The representation of trauma resulting in and from dislocation pervades Messud's novels, which bear out E. Ann Kaplan's distinction between "'family' or 'quiet trauma'" (that happens to someone in close relationship to oneself) and "direct trauma."⁸ The characters' entropic responses to affecting, 'family' traumatic challenges are aligned with and tested by the degree of randomness of the systems they get entangled within. Many of Messud's characters "adopt . . . a philosophy of life along entropic lines [. . . of] the contemporary democratic spirit. . . Everything is intermingled, globalized, hence entropy increases."⁹ Entropy, defined here as personal positioning embodying inertia and falling away, factors intersectionally, for example, in the experience of teenaged Sagesse LaBasse in *The Last Life* (1999). Within this semi-autobiographical text, "entropy" is described by Sagesse's grandfather as a societal response to "chaos" initiated by the National Front's appearance at a funeral for local pipe bomb makers.¹⁰ "The bomb had been intended . . . for a nightclub much frequented by Arabs in the old quarter near the port"¹¹ of the unnamed French city. This singular novel amongst Messud's works foregrounds the *pieds-noirs'* struggles in France after the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62).

Sagesse LaBasse is the daughter of a *pied-noir* father and American-born mother living in the south of France. Her father works in her immigrant *pied-noir* grandfather's three-star hotel, ironically named the

⁷ Messud, "The Road to Damascus," in *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*, 24.

⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 1, 2.

⁹ Philip J. Davis, "Entropy and Society: Can the Physical/Mathematical Notions of Entropy Be Usefully Imported into the Social Sphere?" *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 132, <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol1/iss1/9>.

¹⁰ Messud, *The Last Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1999), 23.

¹¹ Messud, 13.

Bellevue (or ‘nice view’—looking across the Mediterranean towards Algeria). Sagesse’s social interactions are predicated on entangled elements of ability, class, ethnicity and age, amongst others. An instance of intersectional ethnic identity expanding her set of values, she attends a French high school where she reads the work of Algerian-born Albert Camus and writes an essay about the French philosophical tradition of existentialism.

The climactic traumatic event in the novel occurs when Sagesse’s grandfather Jacques lets loose his pent-up frustration possibly over limits on his *pied-noir* positioning in France. Jacques grabs his gun and shoots in rage towards her non-compliant teenage friends, who were raising a raucous after hours in his hotel pool. After he injures one of them, Sagesse reacts to rejection from this same group by becoming attached to a racialised, immigrant, less upwardly mobile social group at school. Continuing to be in flux following her Algerian-born father Alexandre’s suicide, she takes direction from her mother Carol and entropically moves to America to study. Her developing understanding of her relationship to her father’s family’s French Algerian past is understated but captured in the novel’s introductory sentence, “I am American now, but this wasn’t always so.”¹² Distance of time and space allows for her contextualising, framing and bringing into focus the personal journey that is dispersed throughout and informs the rest of the novel.

Sagesse’s mode of entropic falling away from previous matrices is illuminated by Alain Badiou’s notion of self-subtraction, which in Messud’s fictional characters can be unwitting (as in Sagesse’s instance) or deliberate. Dislocation or even disappearance may imply agency.¹³ Often autodiegetic, retrospective narrators such as in *The Last Life* or *The Burning Girl* (2017) invite readerly witness of their process of psychological, emotional and physical movement from an initial position of apparent solidarity with their conditions, to making a break from them. The notion of drawing a line separating off the personal and historical past from an unknown, potentially transformative future—as in Sagesse’s capacity to distinguish a former or “Last Life”; or, in *The Burning Girl*, teenage Cassie Burnes and her single

¹² Messud, 3.

¹³ Elsewhere I consider the disappearance of the character Frederick (Bootie) Tubb of Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* (2006) as someone who “entropic[ally] fall[s] away” and “dislocate[es]” from New York City to Florida: Sandra Singer, “Fiction and Historical Memory: Negotiating the Traumatizing Image of the Falling Man,” in *Ethics and Poetics: Ethical Recognitions and Social Reconfigurations in Modern Narratives*, ed. Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion and Irina Rasmussen Goloubeva (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 242.

mother Bev's serial movement to new locations—is a recurrent trope in Messud's novels.

The “cosmopolitan imaginary” fostered through “transnational affiliation and cultural globalization” enacts “a world of multiple attachments, invoked through [Messud's] complex modes of narration,” according to Vivienne Orchard.¹⁴ Dextrous narrative method renders the sensibility of the characters in time and place, which informs readers' interpretation. Like teenager Julia's retrospective, autodiegetic narration in *The Burning Girl*, Sagesse's narration in *The Last Life* loops back from the start when she makes the assertion noted above about being an “American” in her mid-twenties in New York City, to when she was a youth living in southern France. By the end, retrospection catches up to the novel's beginning time and setting, and then pushes onward with Sagesse conjuring a future with a man, Hamed whom she observes in New York but has not yet introduced herself to. Her imagined future contains but potentially veers off in the light of the past.

Sagesse's experience of familial entropy and migration is instructive. She subscribes to the notion of calculated self-subtraction: “a separation response based on sociocultural negation. . . . In Badiou's subtraction, constructive elements of the system are extracted and abstracted for use in a new order that does not subscribe to the precepts of an earlier one.”¹⁵ Her imagining a relationship with a man she observes named Hamed in New York recalls for the reader her father's unknown-to-him Algerian brother Hamed (conceived decades earlier by her grandfather with household worker, Khalida). Sagesse's father Alexandre was unaware of his brother Hamed, who may have brought him relief through shared ‘direct trauma,’ if not the closure his daughter seeks from the family's colonial past. More specifically Sagesse might want to converse with New York Hamed in order to grasp the implications of her father and extended family's diasporic exodus from Algeria in 1962 during the War of Independence.

Messud's Shorter Fiction within the Tradition of Realism

Raymond Williams's theory of realism is salient to my discussion of Messud's revisiting the past by novel writing—for example, through Sagesse in New York reflecting on the significance for her of her family's

¹⁴ Vivienne Orchard, “‘The Story Takes Place’: Claire Messud's *The Last Life* and the Cosmopolitan Imaginary,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 50, no. 1 (July 2013): 11, doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqt026.

¹⁵ Singer, *Stock Characters in 9/11 Fiction: Homosexuality and Nihilist Performance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 55.

past in French Algeria, then their exodus to France under duress. Williams identifies the immense accomplishments of novelists between 1847 and 1848, starting with Dickens, who respond to social and political upheaval in Europe. His reading of the English realist novel in the 1840s portrays the protagonist's journey towards self-development, regarding especially the social risks and benefits. The protagonist who embodies determining social contradictions provides for the reader a sustainable point of relationship to social dilemmas.¹⁶ Williams balances the relevance of representing lived experience and generating audience affect, something Messud accomplishes masterfully in *The Last Life* and "The Professor's History."

According to literary scholar Ben Parker, "There is a politics behind . . . distinctions. . . Williams . . . identified the same opposition [between Fredric Jameson's destiny and affect] within the single word 'experience.' What Jameson calls 'destiny,' Williams would call 'experience past,' [. . . which] implies narrative. . . . On the other hand, there is 'experience present,' . . . where experience means a heightened subjective awareness . . . an intensity [in the experience of literature] that takes up the full space of the senses." Parker raises questions about the distinction between 'the told' and possibilities of 'the telling' in narrative: for instance, "are we oriented toward the cards that have been dealt us, the wreckage of past fates bequeathed us by history, and the failed hopes detected there? Or are we oriented toward internal states, duration, the awed absorption of flux, the authenticity of feeling, and the affirmation of impersonal forces?"¹⁷ Messud's fiction stands on an apex between past and future and thereby may pivot in either of the two ideological directions Parker delineates.

According to Parker, conventions of contemporary realism allow for stressing both aspects at once. An example of Messud's balancing between signalling external history and inviting the reader's interiority of response through modelling by a primary (focalising) character would be "The Professor's History." The short story was first published in the Cambridge (UK) literary magazine, *Granta* (1995) and subsequently reprinted by Picador Shots (2006).¹⁸ The extradiegetic narrator offers the

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 26.

¹⁷ Ben Parker, "The Moments of Realism," rev. of *The Antinomies of Realism*, by Fredric Jameson, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 28, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-antinomies-of-realism/>. Parker is reviewing Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹⁸ Messud, *The Professor's History* (London: Picador Shots, 2006). Citation from the text is from this edition. The more accessible *Granta* online publication does not include pagination (<https://granta.com/professors-history/>).

salient French colonial history in detail through embedded narrative. For instance, "This was the story of the caves of Dahra [Algeria], as the professor knew it: on 19 June 1845. . . ." ¹⁹ Messud situates the unnamed professor himself very precisely in time through allusion to the First World War (such as Paris taxis taking soldiers to the Front) and the repeated fact that about seventy years have passed since the French colonial mass murders at Dahra and Sbéhas the professor is researching. Messud is as exact in rendering the salient nineteenth-century Algerian history as she is in conveying the more recent early-twentieth-century history of the professor's time. Her story does not assume a reader in 1995, when it was first published, would be familiar with either history.

However, the narrative is not only about specific history but as much about the sensibility of being historical itself, which the story subtly communicates. Another French colonial living in Algeria at the same time as the professor questions the pertinence of the obsessive importance the professor gives to locating and searching the caves of Dahra and Sbéhas in which atrocities occurred: "'Do you see that I must tell this story?'" asked the professor, believing that he had found at last a man of vision and justice. 'I see that this is your struggle,' said the hermit. 'It is with you, and with God.'" ²⁰ Dialogue and detail are germane to readers appreciating the precise positionality of the professor's, the hermit's and various other (silenced) characters' historical selves:

'This is why the stories must be told,' said the professor, eager yet again to convey his vital purpose. 'There is a war in Europe now. We must learn from the past before mistakes are made. Do you see? For the progress of France, here and at home, the truth must be known. Knowledge . . .' he stammered [to the Algerian French administrator], flushed from the wine and conviction, 'knowledge is the only salvation. For the past and the future both.' ²¹

Invoking potential of the *futur antérieur*, the professor's premise is, once this colonial history will have been "known," "the future" may be different, as a result of insight into and taken from "the past."

After "The Professor's History" and *The Last Life*, Messud published *The Hunters* (2001), two novellas that as realist texts develop themes of growing old, death and resiliency. To a certain degree of understanding, *The Hunters* is typical of Messud's novels (though shorter): that is, *The Hunters* features exposition and study of focalising characters'

¹⁹ Messud, 14.

²⁰ Messud, 41.

²¹ Messud, 34 (ellipsis in the original).

(limited) grasp of reality. Close reading Messud's layered prose is crucial for fully appreciating the nuanced messaging that operates on various levels. The implied author conveys the characters' restrictive comprehension based on contingent knowledge and personal bias that is designed for being analysed, interpreted and discussed by readers in response to their "'experience present,' . . . where experience means a heightened subjective awareness."

Popular Culture in Messud's Later Novels

Undoubtedly Messud's most known novel is another historically astute work, *The Emperor's Children* (2006). In part its success can be accounted for due to its specific comparatively recent geographic and historic positioning in space and time: i.e., New York City before and directly after 9-11. The Emperor lording over his 'children' (or acolytes), Murray Thwaite is a stereotypical New York City liberal, revered as a journalist, book author and familiar public speaker at fashionable left-wing charitable events. His expansive hold on the world dissolves in entropic reaction to the 9-11 attacks on New York. Although living in New York City, "Emperor" Murray watches the 9-11 attack on the Twin Towers on television, while enjoying post-sex morning conversation with Danielle Minkoff, his thirty-year-old daughter Marina's best friend and his lover. After seeing the attacks, he leaves Danielle's apartment and returns home to his wife, Annabel. Falling away, Marina, his only child is married and may move abroad. His nephew Bootie, having functioned temporarily as Murray's "amanuensis,"²² wrote a satire of Murray's writing output, feigns his own death in the Twin Towers and moves south to Florida to begin life anew.

Messud's 9-11 novel was published five years after the fall of the Twin Towers. At the time of writing this introduction, more than twenty years have passed since the 'communal trauma' of 9-11—"one vast communal outpouring of emotion and thought."²³ Yet the novel has continued importance within contemporary frames of understanding. Through multiperspectivity (with each chapter being told through a particular focaliser), *The Emperor's Children* pillories white patriarchal privilege. The novel's feminist perspective on patriarchal abuse of power continues to resonate, perhaps even more forcefully in the context of the contemporary #MeToo movement. And there are implications of the novel's further cultural themes that reinforce the incisive and infamous early response to 9-

²² Messud, *The Emperor's Children* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 189.

²³ Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 12.

11 by well-known French philosopher of postmodern culture, Jean Baudrillard. Among other reflections, Baudrillard wrote that it was not the economic system that collapsed in reaction to the events on that day, but rather global capitalism's spectacle of advertising and self-promotion when viewed (by Murray or Danielle perhaps) through the frame of a television screen.²⁴ While the power of television as *the* hegemonic, postmodern device furthering consumerist activity has declined, arguably Facebook as screen-conveying-spectacle functions as a new, improved, replacement millennial-advertising-simulation device.

In interview, Messud commented she had difficulty writing after 9-11, abandoning drafts including the first pages of what would later be reimagined as *The Emperor's Children*. She said 9-11 "changed the trajectory of [the] novel, it also changed her approach to her characters."²⁵ A changed aspect this critic detects is Messud's focus turned more sharply towards the effects of mainstream culture that impacts her characters' everyday lives. All of the main characters in *The Emperor's Children* work in the New York City arts scene and are mostly writers, but also include videographer Danielle and newspaper producer, Ludovic Seeley. Ludo, Murray's son-in-law likens Murray's corpus to a "disgusting old ashtray,"²⁶ while nephew Bootie castigates Murray's self-plagiarism of his previous writings.²⁷ These allusions, though negative, could be grasped more favourably as Murray working within the parameters of postmodernism.

After *The Emperor's Children*, Messud's most recent novels extend the focus on both producers and consumers of popular culture. By popular culture, I intend John Fiske's sense of material that is widely received and extensively engaged with for "process[ing]" lived experience. For instance, hip hop culture provides the title of *The Burning Girl*, and directly influences the characters' opinions and motivates their actions. According to Fiske,

All popular culture is a process of struggle, of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one's personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order. Reading relations reproduce and reenact social relations, so power, resistance, and evasion are

²⁴ See Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003).

²⁵ Tresca Weinstein, "Novel's Focus Took a Turn after 9/11," *Times Union*, Nov. 5, 2006,

https://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/archives/tu_messud_claire.html.

²⁶ Messud, *The Emperor's Children*, 158.

²⁷ Messud, 216.

necessarily structured into them.²⁸

Probing the workings of culture in Western societies, importantly Messud's narratives emphasise culture's relationality to colonial history, Western economy, class and gender.

On the surface, at first the main character and narrator of *The Woman Upstairs* (2013), conventional, forty-two-year-old (middle-age) elementary school teacher, Nora Eldridge appears ordinary and successful. Nora showed some talent for visual art as a high school student but turned to teaching, applying her artisanal sensibility while seeking a stable income to support herself. Years later, she befriends a breakout professional woman, installation artist, Sirena Shahid, and her family, and returns to her true passion, by working as a budding artist creating miniature dioramas of deceased female artists and writers, and by providing a helping hand in the physical creation of Sirena's installation art. Sirena's piece named *Wonderland* interfaces American 1960s Pop culture, Lewis Carroll's nineteenth-century *Alice* and Ibn Tufail's twelfth-century Islamic boy "recluse on his desert island."²⁹ Towards the end of the text, Nora takes a more prominent role in the installation art by performing an imitation of her sixties' artistic idol—fashion model and actor, Edie Sedgwick. Within Sirena's globally successful installation art, Nora appears on video as both a popular culture consumer and producer of the Edie Sedgwick persona. In her short life, Sedgwick self-destructed and died by accident or suicide in 1971. Her virtual, affecting presence on video remains through (Nora's) imitative performance.

Messud's subsequent work, *The Burning Girl* (2017) shares the suicide plot dynamic. This popular novel accounts for teenager Cassie Burnes's attempted suicide, after which she is entropically subtracted (i.e., removed) by her mother from their most recent community of Royston, the Northeastern town into which they had moved. The title of the book echoes intertextually a pop-single played profusely on radio during the story's timeframe: "Love the Way You Lie" (2010), by Rihanna and Eminem.³⁰

²⁸ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 23.

²⁹ Messud, *The Woman Upstairs*, 215.

³⁰ Lyrics of Eminem's song include "Just gonna stand there and watch me burn? / Well, that's alright, because I like the way it hurts / Just gonna stand there and hear me cry? / Well, that's alright, because I love the way you lie,"

<https://www.google.com/search?q=love+the+way+you+lie+lyrics&dq=love+the+way+you+lie+lyrics&aq=chrome..69i57j0i51219.6239j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>. The text initially identifies "that hit Rihanna made with Eminem, so catchy but creepy when you actually listened to the words. 'Stand there and watch

The song title puns on the word “lie.” In *The Burning Girl*, Cassie is both not honest and is (“rumor[ed]”)³¹ to have been “doing things” with “a bunch of guys” “after school” in the boys’ lacrosse locker room³² and elsewhere. Messud’s story is on one level a reflection on the consumption of popular culture, following the line of thinking of cultivation theory (a sociological and communications framework), according to which television and associated media ‘cultivate’ the existing state of affairs, rather than posing a challenge. *The Burning Girl*’s appeal can be attributed to its realistic portrayal of issues commonly discussed in the mediascape and everyday discourse, such as teen self-harm or the theme of teen suicide.

The realist novel is a natural form for the kind of precise situatedness of Messud’s characters, though her writing necessarily expands the genre’s range in order to tackle and invoke readers’ complex, more indeterminate subjectivities than nineteenth-century fiction was understood to involve. Ben Parker elaborates in the following, future-looking commentary on *Antinomies of Realism*: “If there is to be, in Jameson’s phrase ‘realism after realism,’ it will have to mean reclaiming motivation and decisions and the tracing of explanations, in whatever mode available, which will probably have to be invented.”³³ Messud seems to understand the ideological risks of repeating failures of the past by mirroring experience through the realist novel, and so experiments with and accentuates narrative plasticity. By way of illustration, adolescent protagonists Cassie and Julia of *The Burning Girl*, on their journey between childhood and adult maturity, grasp that signifiers are not fixed and neither do they reflect shared meanings, which by definition vary between individuals and contexts. The focalising figure Julia gleans in high school that, while she has known her friend Cassie in essence since nursery school, important specifics have escaped her but may be partially graspable through revisiting the past, which she does through the novel’s homodiegetic narration. Tellingly, Julia learns intimate details about Cassie, such as her rumoured alcohol and drug use and sexual involvement in middle school with the boys’ lacrosse team, from others who know her in ways Julia did not, does not and cannot. Through such critical implications of limited individual perception stored in memory and communicated across time, Messud recognises: “you can never go

me burn . . .”: *The Burning Girl* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 20; italics in the original.

³¹ Messud, *The Burning Girl*, 129.

³² Messud, 127.

³³ Parker, “The Moments of Realism.”

back”³⁴ even to repair misunderstanding, though the novel may productively revisit the past.

Messud’s 2020 “Autobiography in Essays”

The essays collected in *Entanglement and Entropy* discuss Messud’s novels in sequence. This approach validates the strong historical sense that she nurtures through realist fiction writing. The novels’ varied affects encourage making historical and personal connections. Contributors of chapters in the collection respond based on their own interests to features of the specific work under discussion and its place in the Messud corpus. Each chapter addresses one novel in the light of both existing criticism and historical or cultural issues raised by the text: for example, responding to settings in the south of France, but also in colonial Algeria and the western seaboard of the United States, Feryn Wade-Lang’s consideration of *The Last Life* constructs and critically examines French-Algerian emigrant identities. Riccardo Gramantieri reprises Freudian psychoanalytic bearings of trauma studies by re-interpreting *The Emperor’s Children* as a specific kind of American ‘9-11 novel’ that bears on the grieving process. *The Woman Upstairs* intertextually and thematically probes the workings of modern installation art, in response to which Pamela McCallum offers a lively appraisal of 1960s Pop culture in the novel. Such an array of critical approaches bespeaks the variety of historicised themes in Messud’s corpus and reinforces the imperative of scrutinising the ways in which she works realist narrative forms.

Chapters in the essay collection are conversant with Messud’s important, evocative and self-conscious “autobiography in essays,” *Kant’s Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*. This 2020 collection of non-fiction pieces is a treasure trove of Messudian insight into her individual history and the influence of cultural interventions by others on her understanding and realist writing. In the volume, she generously admits influences and reveals stylistic and ideological biases. The first section is composed of essays about her immediate and extended family, while the second part compiles a selection of review pieces Messud wrote up to almost twenty years earlier. The final essay in the collection, on her visits over time with James Wood and their two children Livia and Lucian to the

³⁴ Alex Preston, “Claire Messud: ‘To Be a Writer Is To Stand at the Side’: Interview with Claire Messud,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/07/claire-messud-to-be-a-writer-is-to-stand-at-the-side>.

Boston Museum of Fine Arts, brings together the two dimensions of lived experience and cultural work, and is an example of something seen throughout Messud's corpus: her capacity to integrate high-level intellectual and cultural scrutiny while undertaking and writing about the messy business of family living.

Several of Messud's own essays speak directly to themes in my introductory analysis of her work to date: worthy of note, "Three Essays on Camus and His Legacy" explicate Camus's difficult, adversarial position of longing for French Algeria as his lost homeland, which was and remains at odds with the decolonising politics of the (European) Left.³⁵ This awkward positioning was material to Messud's paternal relations who "would always live in exile, in France, Australia, or North America,"³⁶ as well as to the fictional father and grandfather of *The Last Life*. In a determined response to dispossession, several of her essays underscore contingent aspects and limitations of free will. These include various examples, such as appreciation of the defiant Algerian novelist/journalist Kamel Daoud, whose act of writing resisted political censure for its material (that is conversant with Camus's *L'Étranger*) and who stood in the face of the fatwa against him declared by "the Salafist cleric Abdelfatah Hamadache"³⁷; as well as interpretation of the distinctive, only novel written by the tenacious, queer, cosmopolitan writer, Jane Bowles³⁸; or even divergent approaches to handling the decline of Messud's family pets.

The piece concerning the family dogs, Myshkin and Bear's degenerating with age accentuates Messud's predisposition towards premises of realism. Anecdotes about aging and opposing euthanasia of animals bear out practical and ethical implications of lived experience seen elsewhere in her literary production. In the exposé on the dogs, she sets up a noteworthy personal dichotomy "between those who believe that each of us controls our destiny and has a right to freedom; and those who don't . . . who feel that life is a mucky middle, in which unforeseen situations arise, and possibly endure." The "Our Dogs" essay concludes, "we must care as best we can for those around us, whatever befalls them, with faith that a similar mercy

³⁵ See Messud, "Camus and Algeria: The Moral Question," "A New *L'Étranger*" and "The Brother of the Stranger: Kamel Daoud," in *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*, 113–50.

³⁶ Messud, "Camus and Algeria: The Moral Question," 114.

³⁷ Messud, "The Brother of the Stranger: Kamel Daoud," 141.

³⁸ Messud, "Jane Bowles," in *Kant's Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*, 160–72.

may be shown us in due course.”³⁹ The piece on the dogs expresses humanism with political implications that are drawn out in the Daoud essay, in which Messud rejects the “surveillance, and unchecked police brutality” in Algeria or America that “keeps the silent millions . . . from speaking out.”⁴⁰ Instead, citing Daoud, she puts value in “the intellectual . . . unbending witness to [an] era . . . on behalf of what is human, on behalf of humanity, but especially on behalf of liberty—its value and necessity.”⁴¹

Chapter Synopses

Editing *Entanglement and Entropy*, I was attempting to support canon formation by bringing diverse, international voices into discussions that Messud’s non-fiction and fiction writings generate. Messud herself generously responded in autumn 2021 to a series of questions I posed that pertain to issues raised for me by her prose and by positions taken up by the essay contributors. Messud indicates that she does not subscribe to categorisation of her characters as “types,” but concurs that many of her characters are women “carers,” a female gendered role generally underrepresented and unexamined in fiction. The collection starts with this interview.

Following on the interview, in chapter two Australian academic and creative writer Sophia Barnes interprets *When the World Was Steady* in relationship to the dichotomy between fate and free will as it plays out between two distinct British-born sisters and their aging mother. The characters’ geopolitical locations (in Australia, Bali, London or the Isle of Skye) map onto their shared, but particular intransigence. Barnes’s reading of the novel astutely situates and draws conclusions about the problematic hopes for renewal of one of the sisters, Emmy Simpson. On an entropic pilgrimage of sorts from Sydney, Australia to Abang, Bali and while residing in a compound on Bali funded by its owner, Buddy Sparke’s trafficking in stolen offshore cultural objects, Emmy attempts but fails to discover her own unadulterated authenticity after a divorce.

³⁹ Messud, “Our Dogs,” in *Kant’s Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write*, 92. Judith Butler may recognise and appreciate Messud extending this “love” between animals and people (Messud, 91) to between humans and one another. See James Stanescu, “Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (2012): 567–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2012.01280.x>.

⁴⁰ Messud, “The Brother of the Stranger: Kamel Daoud,” 147.

⁴¹ Messud, 150.

In chapter three, Feryn Wade-Lang appreciates *The Last Life*, the novel that is closest to Messud's father's familial history, by interpreting the ways in which the novel problematises the positioning of the *pieds-noirs* for postcolonial cultural politics and trauma studies. Wade-Lang probes the narrator, Sagesse's transgenerational historical trauma, in order to grasp and ascertain the relative impact on her of the Algerian War of Independence and the LaBasse family's subsequent immigration to France. Importantly, Sagesse LaBasse represents the third generation of her *pied-noir* family living in France, while only her second-generation father and first-generation paternal grandparents experienced the Algerian War and its 'direct' traumatic consequences. Regardless, concerning *The Last Life* and "The Professor's History," Wade-Lang accentuates the importance, challenges and risks of narrating or not one's own or others' traumatic histories.

A critic of postcolonialism and of gender in World literatures, Robin Visel captures in chapter four the ethical messaging of Messud's somewhat anomalously paired novellas, published together in 2001 as *The Hunters*. Foregrounding the similarities between the two novellas—"A Simple Tale" and "The Hunters"—Visel discerns continuities of purpose between these tales and within Messud's corpus to date. Aligning with themes of my collection, her interpretation grasps the hopefulness of characters' entanglements and entropic falling out. Specifically, protagonist Polish Canadian Maria Poniatowski in the end of "A Simple Tale" is oriented towards the future, rather than past WW II historical and personal challenges and losses; and the professor narrator of "The Hunters" starts over after a disturbing summer spent in north London, which the story recounts. In both texts, opportunity for renewal *begins* in confinement with the spectre of death.

In chapter five, Riccardo Gramantieri situates *The Emperor's Children* within the context of 9-11 fiction and trauma studies in order to hypothesise the specific therapeutic work the text does (or did) for 'traumatised' post-9-11 American readers. His exemplar character for working through and past historical trauma is Bootie Tubb. Negotiating recognised stages of the grieving process (denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), Gramantieri works concepts from the psychoanalytic writing on traumatic loss by authors from Freud to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, amongst others. According to Gramantieri, Bootie is the novel's singular character whose actions signify moving past depression into personal (and symbolically American national) renewal.

Drawing out Messud's passion for creativity, in chapter six Pamela McCallum interprets the focus of *The Woman Upstairs* on art, artists and

installations. McCallum argues that the character, internationally acclaimed artist Sirena Shahid gives a gift to self-repressed schoolteacher Nora Eldridge, the gift of artistic self-affirmation, by becoming the mid-1960s Pop star Edie Sedgwick in a performance of rebirth and renewal. However, Nora was (and in the end remains) too caught up in her unwillingness to step outside the familiar (and familial past), so she does not recognise the opportunity. Her failure to seize the chance to live out finally an adolescent dream of becoming an artist is what McCallum sees as the cause of the entropic breakdown of the creative friendship between Nora and Sirena. McCallum's culturally informed and original viewpoint draws out and interprets evidence that Nora's autodiegetic text misrepresents the cause of the collapse of the relationship, and contends that the reader is cued to recognise Nora's account as faulty. McCallum concludes, Nora's finding fault with Sirena for her own failure to blossom as an artist provides evidence for the reader's skepticism of Nora's stated, defiant expectations for the future. The implied author seems to be querying and is doubtful about the actual potential in Nora's willful final statement of self-assertion that comprises the last words of the novel: "Just watch me."⁴²

Chapter seven's reading of *The Burning Girl* considers personal options for young women and girls through a psycho-sociological lens focused on gender. Lauren McLean applauds the novel's identification of adolescent risks of becoming "female," which McLean defines as teens' necessary embodiment of aspects of the feminine within recognisably dangerous, misogynistic Western society. McLean interprets Messud's depiction of teenage "girl" friendship that, she contends, mitigates struggles within the stage of transitioning towards adulthood. Symbolised perhaps by the "encroaching" forest behind one of the protagonists, Cassie's house,⁴³ potential but risks of this stage are apparent. McLean appreciates *The Burning Girl*'s depicting this developmental stage as universal but not identical for the "girls" Cassie and Julia, noting particularly the ways in which "female" friendship is itself fraught and can be undermined—in the novel particularly by conditions of class.

Towards Further Investigation

Entanglement and Entropy offers close reading and historical, theoretical and cultural contextualisation of Messud's narratives written over the last three decades, from *When the World Was Steady* (1994) to "A Dream Life"

⁴² Messud, *The Woman Upstairs*, 302.

⁴³ Messud, *The Burning Girl*, 16.

(2021). Having emerged as a major voice in contemporary North American literature, Messud is recognised by best seller lists but has yet to be 'canonised' by academic research. With the exception of *The Emperor's Children* that was taken up by 9-11 scholars, including me, there is a dearth of critical writing on the impressive body of work that comprises Messud's sustained literary career in fiction and non-fiction prose. I hope the conversations about Messud's novels that this collection of essays initiates will serve to identify textual elements that warrant further scrutiny by future critics.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE MESSUD

SANDRA SINGER

1) You have been favourably referred to as a cosmopolitan writer. Texts such as *When the World Was Steady*, “The Professor’s History,” *The Last Life* and “A Simple Tale” evidence your lived experience among many national frameworks. How do global parameters impact your sense of characters’ identities?

Claire Messud: The reality of our contemporary world is global. The writer Alice Munro returned to live in the house in which her second husband had grown up, in the town in which she herself had also grown up, and she knew that community to bedrock. But most of us nowadays experience life more in the vein of Salman Rushdie’s essay “Imaginary Homelands”—maybe our parents have moved from one place to another; maybe we ourselves have done so; quite possibly both. Many of us have a hybrid heritage, a complex cultural identity that can’t be easily categorised. In various ways, that’s long been the case—certainly in the post-War era, and arguably for much of the twentieth century. Many of the characters I’ve written about have complex identities because that’s my experience of the world.

2) In *The Last Life*, Sagesse is aware that the positioning of the *pied-noir* is politically problematic, yet ‘real’ and inescapable. Would you comment on the challenges complex histories present for an author of white privilege wanting to write historically telling fiction in a postcolonial ethos? Further, how do you see *The Last Life* being relevant in the context of today’s American political concerns?

C. M.: As a fiction writer, I don’t believe it is my role to provide answers but rather to raise questions. It’s my job to record as accurately as I can the way particular people behave in particular situations. As Chekhov wrote, “it’s not my job to tell you that horse thieves are bad people. It’s my job to

tell you what this horse thief is like.” People are complex, and it’s fiction’s job to be complex also. If the imagination is not free—if we embrace the current thinking that we can’t imagine things that we haven’t ourselves experienced—then surely we are doomed. By which I mean, not just fiction is doomed—the planet is doomed. I’ve staked my life on the power of the imagination.

How is *The Last Life* relevant in contemporary America? I think that’s someone else’s question to answer—perhaps it doesn’t feel relevant. But I’d point out that Algeria, just like the United States, was an instance of settler colonialism. The difference is that the colonists who settled in the United States were more numerous and for centuries more effectively repressed and dominated indigenous culture. But the historical violence and oppression is not dissimilar. The original title for *The Last Life* was “The Guilty”—my U.K. editor demurred, suggesting that nobody would want to read a book with that title—but arguably Sagesse LaBasse could be any white American, inheritor of a family history they’d rather not have.

3) In *When the World Was Steady*, Australia is situated as a colonial power in relationship to Bali, which it commercially develops and exploits as an exotic tourist destination. As a representative of Australian colonial power, Emmy appears self-absorbed, ‘willful,’ and behaves selfishly towards her Balinese hosts when she neglects to help Jenny after her return to Australia. Is the professor in “The Professor’s History” similarly a visitor willfully exploiting colonial Algerian culture for self-promotion? Another example could be the professor protagonist in the newly re-released novella, “The Hunters.” Should a critical reader consider the narcissistic visitor as a common character type in your fiction?

C. M.: I don’t actually see the professor in “The Professor’s History” as similarly selfish and exploitative, though some readers may. Certainly at the time I wrote that story, twenty-five years ago, I’d learned, from an early-twentieth-century history of colonial Algeria, an obscure French library book that nobody had touched in decades, about a massacre that wasn’t reported in later historical accounts. That was the origin of the story. The professor in that story is an observer, a lens, someone trying simply to uncover the facts.

Again, as a writer I’m trying to write about human beings as I’ve understood them, about how individual people react in individual situations. I’m not writing about types or archetypes. Are many tourists oblivious? Surely. Are all white people narcissistic? Surely not. Each individual is a