

Preface

Mary Lawrence Test

« ... pour voir la perspective cachée [...] il me fallut la Californie »
(Desanti, *Siècle* 589)

In 1989, Dominique Desanti set out in an oral communication entitled “Tribulations d’une communicatrice”¹ what she then deemed to have been the four major stages of her writing career. First, in her early twenties, she worked *en clandestin*, as a journalist with the underground press. Then, with the French Communist Party, she devoted a decade to *journalisme militant*, passing subsequently into the “open” or informational press in the late 1950s and 1960s. Then came a fourth stage, as an author of fiction and nonfiction. With the 1997 publication of her memoirs, *Ce que le siècle m’a dit*, Dominique Desanti has launched a fifth stage of her career as a communicator—that of memorialist.

The journalist’s objectivity, she says, like the historian’s, resembles the line of the horizon—the writer may reach *for* it but she never reaches it. In her memoirs, Dominique Desanti becomes the imminent witness to many of the most important events of the twentieth century. And we become the privileged observers of that century—inheritors of her world—as she unfolds it in the memoirs. As she says, in a society where we are regularly inundated by images—images that are said to be worth a thousand words—only the journalist’s objectivity represents “le retour au pouvoir singulier de la parole, la restitution d’un climat ressenti par un témoin” (“Tribulations” 272).

We, three of the editors of this *Festschrift*, first met Dominique Desanti as graduate students in the spring of 1968, when she came to the University of California, Los Angeles, to give seminars in the French Department on the novel between the wars and Simone de Beauvoir. We were thus the “trois jeunes femmes [...] éblouies par Simone de Beauvoir” (*Siècle* 582).

As she wrote: “Mars 1968. J’arrive dans le demi-cottage, odorant du miel mauve des glycines, entre deux rangées de jacaranda” (*Siècle* 580). I remember I helped a faculty member pick out that little duplex to rent. I recall the search, but the details escape me. I probably made the final choice. In any case, until I read her memoirs, I did not realize how much she liked it. Now that we have spent time with her in Paris, I can understand just how exotic that typical California-bungalow-style duplex must have seemed.²

How did Dominique see herself in those days? We were too absorbed with the times, too impressed with her—and too self-absorbed—to wonder. Now that we have read the memoirs, we know.

Pour la première fois à Los Angeles, je me suis vu assigner un rôle qui m’est devenu familier et qui m’agace parfois. Je n’existe pas seulement au présent, mais aussi comme témoin : je suis garante d’un fait pour l’avoir vu, du caractère d’une personne pour l’avoir connue. (*Siècle* 581)

We know that she had thought the American university system “très en avance sur nous.” In the Spring of 1968, aged almost 50, she sensed too that the United States might have offered her a new start, had she wished (“En 1968, l’Amérique offrait une deuxième chance”), but as she said, “ma vie se trouvait ailleurs” (*Siècle* 589).

1. Under the ægis of Monique Bilezikian and Michèle Sarde, the colloquium on the media was later published in a special issue of *Contemporary French Civilization*.
2. In *Un métier de chien*, this duplex became “mon demi-cottage blanc [avec] un jacaranda à la pluie violette et un citronnier en fruits” (53).

Certainly, we never sensed that Dominique was uncomfortable with her role as “witness” and “guarantor,” the role that she so much later tries to cast off: “Bref, à mon corps défendant, je suis porteuse de cette (fausse) valeur ajoutée : l’histoire” (*Siècle* 581).³ In fact, we quickly recognized that she was enough of a reporter to distance herself, to appreciate our interest in her, and—in turn—to level her journalistic eye toward us.

As she recalls, scarcely had we welcomed her into our various lives than Martin Luther King was assassinated. I remember driving her home from the campus that day in Spring 1968 and sitting dumbfounded in her living room—probably attempting to swallow the inevitable Sara Lee frozen cheesecake (refusing the inevitable offer of room-temperature Vodka)—and talking, trying to explain to myself and to her what had happened and what it meant, what it would mean.

She wrote: “[C]et assassinat [fut] ma première émotion américaine” (*Siècle* 586). There were many more emotional experiences to come—personal and political. Despite her “visa de pestiférée” (*Siècle* 584), which promised immediate expulsion from the United States if she participated in any political activity, Dominique was fearless. She never shied from spontaneous and enthusiastic participation in anything we were doing.

Spring 1968 and the smell of wisteria and the taste of cheese cake and being linked first-hand through Dominique to the authors whom we had studied so reverently over the years. What a heady, oneiric blend all these memories remain to this writer—a “trip,” a blur. Vietnam, Black Panthers, Venice, Synanon, “happenings.” “Hell No, We Won’t Go.” “Power to the People.”

As well as throwing herself wholeheartedly into our lives, Dominique connected us to her world. We shared with her, vicariously, the *événements* of May 1968 in France. She was in Los Angeles; her husband, Jean-Toussaint Desanti, her friend Jacques de Sugny, and other friends were in Paris, where she was prevented from returning until the “revolution” was over. “Mais on a toujours fait les barricades ensemble,” she lamented, as much to herself as to us. By June, she had already left Los Angeles when another political assassination took place—that of Robert Kennedy.

Who were we for Dominique in 1968? We note a comment she attributes to an unnamed friend in the memoirs: the young people of the 1960s belonged to “la génération des consommateurs.” They were the young couple of Perce’s *Les choses* (*Siècle* 563). But we were not. The young people of the 1960s whom she met in California were also two years beyond the beginnings of campus unrest at Berkeley. We were protesting the war in Vietnam and still marching for civil rights.

Like Dominique Desanti and her generation before us, we wanted to change the world. We were, of course, far from the 20-year-old that Dominique had been, compelled by external forces to resist or be crushed. But we were idealists, and the times were again ripe for idealism, as they had been in occupied and post-war France. The Left seemed to offer some hope for a new society. How nice it would be now, as one of us recently put it, to go back to those days when the issues were all clear-cut, when it was easy to pick sides and resolutely defend right against wrong.

Our idealism was entrenched, but we felt as yet unformed. We were studying to *become* something, preparing for academic careers, and setting other goals that we have been able to achieve only imperfectly. We thought that we were completely caught up in the outside world, but we were also exploring personal relationships (Dominique set out for more than one of us the utopian basis of her pact with Touky). We were sometimes eaten from within by personal doubt. The need to protest the war, struggle for civil

3. We later thought it likely, in fact, that Dominique identified with Luc, the film-maker-anthropologist in *Un métier de chien* who says: “C’est mon sort; je me trouve souvent sur place quand les choses arrivent” (*Métier* 168).

rights—to change the world—was not so great that we could not sometimes focus entirely on ourselves.

Like youth of all times, we were trying to control the uncontrollable, hold the untenable, understand the incomprehensible, partly because it *was* a time when the issues *were* more clear-cut. Dominique never tried to talk us out of our illusions, or disillusion. Despite all that she had seen and experienced, she never tried to intimate that we did not know how bad things could be, or how lucky we were. She understood fully our preoccupations, concerns and desires and was genuinely interested in them. She shared our interest in exploring fully the outside world and the personal.

It is almost embarrassing now to think of ourselves as we were then, and how we might have seemed to Dominique. We did not know that she would later write: “La Californie me transformait” (*Siècle* 589). As she said in an interview with us in Fall 1996, in Paris, looking back: “[O]n ne re-sent pas toujours le *moi* d’alors.” “[E]n écrivant mes mémoires, je me suis constamment trouvée ou désarmée ou risible” (Rochester and Test 9-10). Now, at almost ten years past the age that Dominique was in 1968, we have learned that our elders did not always have the answers. We have become parents and teachers in our turn, and we realize that we do not either.

As she quotes her husband, Jean-Toussaint Desanti: “Tel est le paradoxe de la mémoire qui n’est rien d’autre que le paradoxe du Temps” (*Siècle* 670). The paradox of memory *is* the paradox of Time. Now, by virtue of that paradox, it is we who have shifted to the role of historians—historians of the time we first met Dominique Desanti. It is we the “porteuses de cette fausse valeur : l’histoire.”

Thus it is that we pay tribute with this volume to our former professor, Dominique Desanti, who inspired us, encouraged us, respected us, saw the potential in us, helped us develop it, and who has become our friend.

Los Angeles

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