

# Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in French and Francophone Literature



Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender  
in French and Francophone Literature

Edited by

Melanie Hackney and Aaron Emmitte

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in French and Francophone Literature,  
Edited by Melanie Hackney and Aaron Emmitte

This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3157-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3157-4

*To Marianne and Logan...  
you're the roux to our gumbo.*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, we would like to thank our contributors—Thomas Amans, Alecia Dantico, Kristina Kosnick, Megan Lawrence, Marie Chantal Mofin-Noussi, and Denis Pra—for their hard work and continued patience throughout the editing process.

*Lagniappe* is a Louisiana French term that denotes “a little something extra,” and this project first began as our lagniappe contribution to the Department of French Studies Graduate Student Association’s yearly conference. In January of 2009 at the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual conference, scholars from fifteen states and two Canadian provinces came together to present their research and share their insights on the selected themes of Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender. The following chapters embody the diversity of thought, background, and experience of the conference from which it originates.

Numerous organizations and individuals have made this project possible. For their financial support, we would like to show our appreciation to The Center for French and Francophone Studies, The College of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Department of French Studies, and The Friends of French Studies at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. We express our sincere gratitude to Professors Sylvie Dubois, Robert Lafayette, Alexandre Leupin, and Gregory Stone for their unwavering support. Finally, we would like to acknowledge Professor Gaëtan Brulotte, whose inspiring keynote lecture has been instrumental in the formation of this work.

To our colleagues Jean Xavier Brager, Mame Fatou-Niang, and Carrie O’Connor, who took the time to carefully read and review the included articles, your input has been invaluable and we can’t thank you enough for all of your hard work and thoughtful insight.

We would also like to recognize and thank Kino International, Les Grands Films Classiques, and StudioCanal for granting us permission for the use of the included photographs.

Lastly, we send our heartfelt thanks to the entire faculty, staff, and graduate student body of The Department of French Studies at Louisiana State University for fostering an environment of cooperation and support that remains a constant motivation.



## INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the word. And the word created the divide between the sexes. One might thus sum up Lacan's view on gender, a view that posits the reason for which issues of gender and sexuality exist is because we speak.<sup>1</sup> Whether our ability to produce natural language lie at the heart of the gender divide or not, we find language as the heart of this study, the *fil rouge* as it were, that links each of the chapters herein. It is hardly surprising, given the focus of this collection as French and Francophone literature. The works addressed in this volume however are not the works of philosophers, psychoanalysts, or literary critics, but of those who use language as their art—those who play with the subtleties of language, who weave it as though making a tapestry, into the stories that they tell. These are authors who, nonetheless, explore, expose, and shape the very ways in which we think about sexuality, eroticism, and gender. They take up the often abstruse material of Freud, Lacan, Butler, Kristeva, and others, to fabricate a literature of ideas, one that is more easily accessible to their own contemporary societies and cultures. Their stories become playgrounds for gender games, platforms for political change, or battlegrounds for feminism where the very language that divides them becomes the means to reunite them, and where, ultimately, the language that simultaneously serves as obstacle and tool, will be overcome and re-invented to subvert the long-established heteronormativity and phallogocentricity that it has created.

The history of any one of the three subject matters addressed here could easily fill volumes: in fact, the mere definition of the term “gender” forms a point of dissension for scholars. We are indeed very far from Joan Scott's famous definition of the eighties where she calls gender a “social category imposed on a sexed body.”<sup>2</sup> The reality of gender cannot be so easily reduced to the binary gender system that has been largely promoted since the origins of gender studies. However, the chapters here do not seek to describe the history of sexuality, eroticism, or gender, or even to define them, but rather to explore moments of their evolution in literature and to subsequently understand how that literature reflects, shapes, and changes a society's perceptions. While the following chapters do not necessarily promote the binary gender system or a particularly feminist viewpoint, they do reflect the prominence of these movements as central tenets of

Western thought, or more particularly of French thought throughout the last few centuries. Excepting perhaps our examination of Garréta's ambiguous novel *Sphinx*, the authors discussed in these chapters represent, for the most part, the binary gender tradition. Moreover, women—their evolution and their struggles—become central actors and/or the subject of the collection as a whole. This simple fact suggests that woman, as a category of this binary gender system, forms the very foundation of sexuality, eroticism, and gender studies.

Freud's quest to find an answer to the question: "What do women want" lies at the very foundation of psychoanalysis. In his *New Conferences on Psychoanalysis*, Freud adopts the view of a woman as an underdeveloped man, a notion similar to ancient Greek and Roman thought. For Freud, there exists only one sexuality, which is phallic in essence. Furthermore, he asserts that all humans are bisexual by nature. To believe that the female simply follows and fails to fully achieve the male process of development necessarily inhibits Freud from asking a more appropriate question: is there a difference between the female and the male? His successor would however address this very question, one that will come to occupy a central place in Lacanian thought: *Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*. While some have translated this phrase in English as "There is no sexual rapport," a more appropriate phrasing would be: there is no logical relation between the genders.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Lacan goes on to reconcile the contradictions in Freud's thinking by acknowledging two sexualities or genders: one which can be represented in language or art—the masculine—and one that escapes representation—the feminine.

Thus it is perhaps thanks to women that the unconscious is born. Without ever seeking to reduce feminine desire to a simple and straightforward category, Freud may never have stumbled upon the foundation of his field. And like in any science, we see the building blocks that form the base are often found inadequate, are removed, or corrected. Others remain as the springboard for advancement. Such is the case with Freud and Lacan, whose psychoanalytic doctrines differ enough to demonstrate the progress made in their field, but that complement each other to the point where Lacan famously stated at the conference in Caracas shortly before his death: "It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian." Lacan's transformation of a single sexuality to a single representable sexuality exemplifies the relationship between the two great minds. Yet while he admits a second sexuality, he situates it as the Other in that it escapes all understanding. In Lacanian psychoanalysis therefore, "woman" does not exist. There can be no category to represent all women, no way to define or to sum up that which constitutes female, as

the character Don Giovanni demonstrates perfectly. It is this notion that creates the core of gender studies, and subsequently, of this collection of work.

The trajectory of thought from Freud, to Lacan, to feminist thinkers such as De Beauvoir, Kristeva, and Cixous echoes throughout the pages of this book, as it echoes through the centuries of literature that the authors herein address. Certainly, beginning an introduction with Lacan may seem an odd starting point for a collection that features many authors whose thinking are often diametrically opposed to his. However, Lacan—like Freud—lays the foundational stones for a field which has helped to move women forward, as Simone De Beauvoir argues: “Thanks to psychoanalysis, sexual hypocrisy has been in part dissipated.”<sup>4</sup> It seems only fitting, however, that by beginning with Lacan, our introduction attempt to address the same breadth and diversity of thought as the chapters that follow.

In Chapter One, Kristina Kosnick establishes literature as a space where through language, societal norms concerning sexuality, eroticism, and gender, are subverted by authors whom Kosnick refers to as “revolutionaries.” She demonstrates that through the use of *elle* as a universalized subject and through the vehement rejection of a phallogentric linguistic system, contemporary authors Monique Wittig, Anne F. Garréta, and Nina Bouraoui reconceptualize gender through language.

For each of the authors she discusses, Kosnick stresses the role of the reader as an active participant in what she terms “experimental” writing. These experimental authors employ various techniques to redefine and reconstruct language, such as avoiding tenses and adjectives that make gender apparent. As a result, gender divisions are obscured, even erased, as to create an identity not marked by gender, but one devoid of any sexual orientation. Kosnick proves the power of language in recreating ways of seeing and thinking about the world and our own (sexual?) identity.

As innovative or “revolutionary” as these authors’ attempts to subvert heteronormativity by using language in new ways may be, they arrive in the wake of centuries of literature that would, in diverse and unique ways, attempt (as Chapter Two will show) and sometimes succeed (as we see in Chapter Three) in subverting aspects of the heteronormative tradition. Marie Chantal Mofin Noussi explores the nuances of eroticism in the eighteenth-century epistolary novel *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* by Françoise de Graffigny. A text which was largely ignored by scholarship but has become the subject of more recent scholarly attention, *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* gives voice to Zilia, its heroine, as she describes capture from her homeland and subsequent journey to France, where language and

culture keep her prisoner in a society where she can only be perceived as other.

Noussi reveals the text's erotic nature through what she terms the "refusal of eroticism." She posits the author's expression of that which is unaccomplished or unachieved as a means to convey eroticism. Much like Lacan who places the signifier of desire as being forever out of reach, that is, a goal that is always beyond realization, Noussi describes eroticism as a movement toward what is desired. Therefore, Graffigny conveys the erotic through that which is lacking, through the refusal of completion. Indeed, the very ending of the novel constitutes an act of refusal not only on behalf of its heroine but of its author as well. The Peruvian's decision not to marry and therefore to leave her integration into French society incomplete renders her self-eroticization complete. She chooses to remain the object of desire, the unattainable goal. But it is not only her suitor whose desire remains unsatisfied, but that of the readers whose longing for a more conventional ending will not be satiated.

Noussi makes manifest the author's and her heroine's use of eroticism as a tool of empowerment in a heteronormative French culture where much like in Kosnick's contemporary examples, language acts as a powerful tool of subversion. Graffigny's depiction the French language as Zilia's rapist creates a similar juxtaposition between male and female writing spaces that Kosnick establishes. While epistolary authors such as Graffigny may not have been revolutionaries in their time, they nonetheless established their genre as a space where the feminine "I" could be safely and strategically employed in a society and time where the female subject's identity was intricately tied to her mother, her husband, her children, and societal expectations therein imposed.<sup>5</sup> While Graffigny uses this "I" as a tool for female identity and empowerment, her heroine uses it as a weapon against her rapist, by claiming it as her own means of expression and means for self-identification.

Graffigny's symbolic representation of rape through language brings us to Chapter Three, where the rape is explored both inside and outside its literary space. In an innovative new study, Megan Lawrence explores the links between rape in nineteenth-century French fiction and reality. Lawrence turns to French penal code in the nineteenth century and how it defines and punishes acts of rape. Tracing amendments made to the laws throughout the century, Lawrence demonstrates a strong parallel between nineteenth-century fiction's representations and condemnations of rape and the subsequent changes to the penal code concerning rape. She convincingly establishes popular authors as the impetus for changes which achieved two major advances: to more clearly define acts of sexual assault



and to institute harsher punishments for those convicted of those acts.

Through her exploration of Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, and Emile Zola's *La Bête humaine*, Lawrence shows literature not only as a means for political commentary, but as an impetus for political change. In reaction to the overly ambiguous terms used to define rape in the early penal code laws, these authors use language and imagery to depict the violence and horrors of rape. What is more, as Lawrence argues, they give a voice to rape victims in their novels, thereby using language once more as a tool that simultaneously empowers and subverts.

In Chapter Four we shift away from literature to look at eroticism once more but this time in surrealist terms in a medium where the rich imagery of surrealism found one of its most powerful means of expression: cinema. Denis Pra des Rebours examines three of Luis Buñuel's films to determine a link between Buñuel's interpretation of eroticism and George Bataille's representation of desire. For Pra, these are essentially one and the same. In the same way that Mofin-Noussi demonstrates the eroticism of Graffigny's epistolary novel through creation of desire and refusal, Pra defines desire as that which is created through societal restrictions. In Buñuel's cinematographic and surrealist world, the erotic consists most frequently in the feminine. That is to say, women evoke desire in men, rendering them objects – or rather victims— of heteronormativity.

For Pra, Buñuel's decision to shock audiences derives from his inability to change the system which acts as the antagonist, that is, which creates desire through its restrictions on man—namely, Christianity or religion. Using shock as a means to induce change can be effective, as Megan Lawrence proves in her examination of Eugène Sue who intimates a rape act through a violent knife scene which powerfully portrays the horrific scene through the mere allusion to the act. However, one may ask if the linguistic imagery of surrealism lends itself to ease of interpretation that we find in nineteenth-century authors such as Hugo, Zola, and Sue. For the Surrealists and especially for Buñuel, inspiring shock and confusion in the audience becomes almost an end in itself, rather than a means to evoke political change. Nonetheless, Pra sees the critique of the established order at the heart of Buñuel's work. This critique does not carry with it so much the hope of change or revolution that we see in the previous articles, but rather a pessimism that demands not so much a new way of living, but a new way of seeing – a concept which lay at the very heart of surrealist thought.

This pessimism brings us to Tom Amans' treatment of Michel Houellebecq in Chapter Five where he seeks to answer the question of

how to qualify Houellebecq's representation of women. Amans endeavors to refute accusations of misogyny aimed at both the author and his works. Rather than focusing on the negative depictions of women, he approaches the houellebecqian world as a whole, demonstrating that many critics stop short in their literary analysis, too easily giving in to what appears on the surface to be blatant misogyny, but what Amans argues plays an integral role in a houellebecqian world-view.

For Amans, Michel Houellebecq subscribes to, at the very least in his novelistic portrayals, a decadent society where human relations are marked by dissociation and indifference. He posits that what critics would label misogyny in Houellebecq's novels does not constitute a predisposed attitude toward women but rather a pessimistic view of society and its members, men and women alike. Moreover, Amans points to the advanced state of decomposition in which we find almost all of the social relations in Houellebecq's novels, be it male/male, female/female, or female/male. As Amans demonstrates, Houellebecq's deconstruction of society eliminates any notions of human relations, reducing the individual to an indifferent and self-concerned social climber concerned only with his/her own hierarchical status. Such a view leaves no room for a separation of the male/female, let alone misogyny, as it levels essentially everyone to an even playing-ground, even if it is of the lowest and most base moral standing.

Be it misogynist or misanthropic, Houellebecq's world-view, as depicted by Amans, fails to offer a solution to the societal decay and moral decomposition that the characters embody. The narrative deconstruction is simply that, a de-constructing without any apparent hope of reconstruction, or rather reappropriation, which lies at the heart of our final section. In Chapter Six, Alecia C. Dantico focuses on Assia Djébar's attempts to reappropriate language to be strictly feminine, through the refusal to adhere to normative textual models. This chapter constitutes, in every sense of the term, a *revolution*—as it not only brings us full circle from the “revolutionaries” of Chapter One, Djébar's works go a step further by using language not only to create androgyny, as we saw with the universalized subject *elle*, but to create a writing that is strictly feminine – a space which denies male access. Dantico asserts that for Djébar, it is not enough to master the phallogentric language; rather she seeks to move beyond it through a new historical writing whose means of expression is the female body.

Dantico begins by looking at the concept of *l'écriture féminine* and its place, or lack thereof, in undergraduate humanities curricula. She demonstrates that feminist thinkers and their once strong demand for a

uniquely feminine or feminist text have taken a back seat to their male counterparts in undergraduate humanities courses. However, Dantico finds the answer to the call in the works of Luce Irigaray and Assia Djebar, each of whose *écriture féminine* successfully complete the work of their predecessors who “first began to deconstruct the phallogentric paradigm.” By exploring Djebar’s creation of her own identity through language – an identity that is simultaneous, multi-valent, and indefinable—Dantico brings us back to where we began with the conclusion that woman is that which resists definition. And so, we come full-circle to Lacan, to the indefinable feminine, thereby reaffirming Freud’s mistake in asking “What do women want?” rather than the more appropriate question: What is woman?

One could argue that this very question plays some role, be it minor or significant, in each of the following chapters. This exploration of sexuality, eroticism, and gender in French and francophone literature offers a fresh look at both past and contemporary texts—a look that not only answers questions for the reader but also creates new ones. Does a logical relation between the genders exist? Better yet, do genders exist? How many? What ones? What divides them? Clearly, authors like Wittig, Garréta, and Bouraoui would argue against the traditionally clear and binary gender delineations, creating a more fluid space for a multitude of gender and sexual identities. What constitutes eroticism? Is it, as Pra asserts, the desires shaped by what society denies us? Does Buñuel’s depiction of desire as residing in the male and provoked by the female constitute misogyny through its objectification of the feminine? Are Houellebecq’s portrayals of women part of a larger worldview that regards all genders as actors in the decadence of modern society? If so, does Houellebecq also view the gender divide with the same fluidity as some of the other authors discussed here?

Such questions are limitless. Many have already been—and some have yet to be—the subject of further study. This collection, we hope, will not only answer some questions but more importantly will exemplify the very special relationship between literature—and sexuality, eroticism, and gender studies. Sometimes the literature invents and shapes their social reality, while other times it struggles to keep up with it. If language creates the divide between the sexes, then is it not the perfect means to destroy it? If you have not already answered “yes” to this question, our hope is that after reading the following chapters, you will.

—Melanie Hackney  
Aaron Emmitte

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See: Leupin, Alexandre. "The Impossible Copula (Humanities and Judaeo-Christianity)." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 29, 3 (1999): 11-20.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, Joan. "Gender, A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (Dec 1986): 1056.

<sup>3</sup> See: Leupin, Alexandre. *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science, Religion*. New York: Other Press, LLC, December 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. *Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Marybeth Timmermann. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2004. 215.

<sup>5</sup> For a fascinating new study that explores mother-daughter relations throughout the past few centuries in France, see: Jensen, Katharine. *Uneasy Possessions: The Mother-Daughter Dilemma in French Women's Writings, 1671-1928*. U of Delaware P, 2011.

CHAPTER ONE

READING CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES  
AS REVOLUTIONARIES:  
RADICAL TEXTUALITY AND QUEER  
SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WORKS OF MONIQUE  
WITTIG, ANNE F. GARRÉTA,  
AND NINA BOURAOUI

KRISTINA KOSNICK

Any important literary work is like the  
Trojan Horse at the time it is produced.  
Any work with a new form operates as a  
war machine, because its design and its  
goal is to pulverize the old forms and  
formal conventions.  
—Monique Wittig, “The Trojan Horse”

This paper takes Monique Wittig’s 1969 publication of the feminist war epic *Les Guérillères* as a point of departure in order to sketch out a trajectory of the dialogue between literature and theoretical perspectives that moves from second wave feminism to the advent of queer theory. Close readings of texts by Monique Wittig, Anne F. Garréta, and Nina Bouraoui demonstrate that these contemporary women writers of French expression employ literature as a space where fixed signifiers are refuted and the world is conceived of differently. *Les Guérillères* marked a fundamental subversion of phallogocentric discourse through the writing of *elles* as universalized subject, thereby drawing a parallel between the Amazonian society at war against the patriarchy in the text and the author’s fierce critique of masculine linguistic and societal privilege. Likewise Wittig’s *oeuvre*, both her experimental literary texts and proto-queer theoretical work, sets the stage for narratives such as Garréta’s and

Bouraoui's that rely on ruptures in textual normativity in order to materially create queer worlds in writing. By presenting the friendship-turned-romance between two gender ambiguous characters, Garréta's *Sphinx* advocates for the preclusion of the category of "gender" while reappropriating the mythology of the sphinx's enigma and its seemingly tragic ends. On a different note, her autofictional novel *Pas un jour* ties together a series of disparate vignettes said to be taken from the author's life and spontaneously evoked by the intersection between "women" and "desire" in her memory. The disjunctive quality of this assemblage of *récits*, each of which can be read independently from the others, calls into question the presumed unity of "subjectivity" itself. Similarly, Bouraoui's *Mes mauvaises pensées*, a sort of confessional narrative addressed to her therapist, foregrounds polyvocality as it infinitely complicates and multiplies subjectivity in myriad articulations with various physical, cultural, and geographical bodies. As the author explores her desires, fears, and memories, she weaves together complex and multidimensional constellations of countless voices that strike a harmonious chord. Considered together, these revolutionary literary texts coalesce in a movement against (hetero)normativity, which—instead of representing our world—posits ways of revis(ion)ing it.

Throughout the past century, both the impact of innovative literary and theoretical movements and the contributions of writers of marginalized gender and sexual identities have profoundly marked the body of literature written in French as well as informed our ways of thinking about language and identity. From the genre of the *nouveau roman* to poststructuralist feminisms and the formal constraints of writer's collectives such as Oulipo, many have worked to challenge and to subvert not only traditional narrative forms but also traditional notions of subjectivity, blurring the distinctions between literature and theory by politicizing fiction and poeticizing the essay. Hence in literature, queer subjects and experimental writing seem to go hand in hand. In a recent book, Michael Lucey has focused on this intersection, arguing that the representation of queer sexualities by writers such as Colette, Gide, and Proust influenced the evolution of prose forms in twentieth-century French literature. Advancing that these narratives' subject pronoun 'I,' or the lack thereof, effectively shaped social conceptualizations of queer sexualities, Lucey emphasizes the performative nature of certain innovative literary texts.<sup>1</sup> Theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have also called attention to literary performativity in their essay "Sex in Public," making the case that works of literature, along with other cultural forms, have the potential to "allow

for the concretization of a queer counterpublic” by “index[ing] a virtual social world.” Berlant and Warner elucidate:

A queer “world,” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.<sup>2</sup>

By consistently resisting homogenization and hegemony, queer world-making projects work to counter, undermine and subvert heteronormativity. In literature, this doesn’t only happen by presenting the reader with queer themes, characters, and contexts. More importantly, it is the refusal to adhere to normative textual models—to conceive of language, narrative, and subjectivity in new ways—that renders certain texts doubly queer, generating renewed understandings of links between language, personhood, and the world.

Although the representation of non-normative genders and sexualities in literature is of undisputed importance, particularly when it aims to increase the visibility of marginalized populations, it is equally imperative to consider the ways that texts do not simply represent queer subjectivities but rather textually create them through linguistic manipulations and experimental narrative strategies. The radical textuality of these literary works recasts linguistic significance, producing subjectivities that are fluid, subversive, and polymorphous. Consequently these texts act as literary performances that participate in the construction of queer counterpublics, informing social conceptions of identity, particularly as it is articulated through gender, sexuality, and erotic desire. Beyond recognizing the texts themselves as revolutionary in form, as readers, we are also acted on by these texts that challenge our worldviews and ask us to conceive of other ways of being, both in and through language. The notion of “reading narratives as revolutionaries” plays on this twofold nature of literary performativity; texts influence literary tradition at the same time as they inform readers’ linguistic associations and worldviews.

Just as Monique Wittig’s work made critical linguistic and canonical interventions, denouncing grammatical gender norms and retheorizing novelistic form, engaged readers of her texts are also recruited as active participants in this revolution. Fundamental to Wittig’s politico-literary project is the concept of “lesbian” as a gender that transcends the binary opposition tethering “female”/“woman” to and against “male”/“man” in

what Judith Butler has since called “the heterosexual matrix.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Wittig is perhaps best known for having said that “lesbians are not women,” a belief that proliferates itself in her essays as well as in her novels.<sup>4</sup> In Wittig’s view, because “lesbian” can neither be quantified by nor anchored to “woman” or “man,” it emerges as a universal subject that transcends the gender binary. Far from mirroring the empirical world, *Les Guérillères* generates a queer counterpublic by revolutionizing the linguistics of gender. Similarly, in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), Wittig goes on to point out that language, because it is phallogocentric and founded on a gender binary, innately precludes the lesbian subject.<sup>5</sup>

By focusing on an Amazonian society at war against the patriarchy, Wittig’s *Les Guérillères*<sup>6</sup> metaphorically works against phallogocentric tradition. The fact that the title of the work itself is a neologism emphasizes the performative potential of the piece. That is to say that reading it serves to contextualize for the reader who exactly the *guérillères* are (and what they *do*), which in turn triggers a structural reorganization of linguistic significance. The already fragmentary text is punctuated at regular intervals by a long series of women’s names printed in capital letters that begins and ends with a sort of poetic manifesto. At the end of the book, Wittig includes a list of previously published works she drew from when writing *Les Guérillères*, explaining: “Les Guérillères sont le lieu de rencontre de quelques textes, dans lesquels des « prélèvements » ont été effectués, à la fois comme références socio-historico-culturelles du livre et comme des distances que le livre tente d’opérer par rapport à elles.”<sup>7</sup> These names are borrowed from other contexts, reappropriated as active participants in an antimisogynist and antiheterosexist society, recast as *guérillères* working against a linguistic tradition that subsumes *elles* in *ils*.

The text is circular in the sense that, on a mimetic level, victory in the war against *ils* takes place at the end of the book although *elles* has been the universalized subject pronoun since the book’s beginning. The first page announces: “ELLES AFFIRMENT TRIOMPHANT QUE / TOUT GESTE EST RENVERSEMENT.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Wittig plays on the notion of *joindre le geste à la parole*, definitively inscribing her text as an act of overthrow. *Les Guérillères* gestures linguistically at toppling an oppressive discourse by reclaiming/rewriting women’s literature, history, and language, as marked by the systematic usage of the pronoun *elles*. The performative nature of the text itself, even when considered independently from Wittig’s political project, is further underscored by the repetition of “elles disent,” which is written nearly forty times throughout the relatively short work and succeeds in drawing our attention to writing’s transformative



force. In a particularly striking example, language's capacity to effect material change is emphasized: "Elles disent [...], ils t'ont toujours *dans leurs discours* traînée dans la boue. Elles disent, ils t'ont *dans leurs discours* possédée violée prise soumise humiliée tout leur saoul."<sup>9</sup> In this passage, the performative force is double as *elles* take action in their own "discours" rising up against what language has historically perpetuated against them. While the expression "traîne[r] dans la boue" and the series of verbs including "possède[r]" and "viole[r]" can all be read figuratively as demonstrative of the subjugation of women Wittig seeks to subvert, they also strongly evoke a physicality that lends a corporeal dimension to this linguistic fight. Similarly, the understanding that language has the performative potential to radically alter our world is highlighted here:

Elles disent, je refuse désormais de parler ce langage, je refuse de marmotter après eux les mots de manque manque de pénis manque d'argent manque de signe manque de nom. Je refuse de prononcer les mots de possession et de non-possession. Elles disent, si je m'approprie le monde, que ce soit pour m'en déposséder aussitôt, que ce soit pour créer des rapports nouveaux entre moi et le monde.<sup>10</sup>

Wittig's *elles* will not speak "ce langage," but rather claim agency to seize and expropriate the world as we have known it—quite literally making *Les Guérillères* a text that does what it says.

Whereas Wittig wrote to counter a linguistic tradition that both precludes the lesbian and subsumes the linguistically feminine subject, in the novel *Sphinx* (1986),<sup>11</sup> Anne F. Garréta creates a queer counterpublic that is oriented towards the preclusion of the concept of gender and/or fixed sexual identity altogether. For although the gender/sex of the two protagonists is explicitly problematized, erotic desire itself is of fundamental importance. The narrative focuses on a love affair between A\*\*\* and the narrative voice *je*, both of whom remain free of linguistically gendered markers. Even as they engage in a sexual relationship they are never described in ways that follow from traditional gender norms. Although secondary characters in the novel are marked as feminine or masculine, A\*\*\* and *je* remain both mimetically and diegetically "androgynous." Garréta, a member of the experimental writer's group Oulipo, accomplishes this linguistic challenge by narrating the story in the *passé simple* and *imparfait* tenses, which are not inflected by gender. Similarly, adjectives with gendered form are never directly applied to the characters themselves, only to attributes or aspects of their persons. This strategy is quite successful in French because "sa présence" can be read as "her presence," "his presence," or even "hir presence," the genderqueer

alternative in English. Garréta relies heavily on this aspect of the French language when depicting A\*\*\* and *je*, as exemplified in the following passage:

Le plaisir que je prenais à sa présence ne tenait pas à l'originalité de ses vues non plus qu'à une identité de nos goûts; nous ne disputions ni ne discussions. Sa présence et sa conversation m'étaient un agrément, tout comme la contemplation de son corps ou de sa danse : agrément esthétique que je ne saurais attribuer qu'à une légèreté d'être qui savait se garder de l'inanité. Frivole et grave, je ne puis mieux définir A\*\*\*, dans la subtile dimension d'une présence sans insistance qui lui était propre.<sup>12</sup>

In one sense, the phrase “je ne puis mieux définir A\*\*\*” does seem to draw the reader's attention to the absence of gendered definitions in the novel, and therefore *je*'s inability to describe A\*\*\* in other terms. Likewise, it can be read metatextually as an allusion to the experimental nature of Garréta's novel. And yet the ambiguity of “je ne puis mieux définir A\*\*\*” also suggests that A\*\*\* could not *be* better described; A\*\*\* cannot be defined, labeled or identified but exists ultimately as an inscrutable being—as a “sphinx” whose individuality, free of the mark of gender, is uncompromised and whole. Gill Rye has noted that *Sphinx* exemplifies the kind of text where:

reading can be formulated as a dialogue which takes place within a framework of (changing) power relations. The individual reader has to negotiate his or her particular reading in dialogue with, in response to, and in interaction with (and against) the text.<sup>13</sup>

Rye suggests that the uncertainty cultivated by literary works such as Garréta's might serve to enmesh the readers' own identities in the reading of the text, thus generating the creation of a new text.<sup>14</sup> In this way, *Sphinx* actively participates in queer world-making, not only by presenting a counterpublic that realizes the preclusion of “gender” but also by challenging its readers' preconceptions about language and personhood, inviting us to think about—and live in—the world differently.

On a mimetic level, both A\*\*\* and *je* embody traditionally contradictory attributes in respect to gender. A\*\*\* is a muscled dancer with a shaved head who, as is typical of many entertainers, is often putting on make-up. *Je* is a quiet intellectual, a student of theology who becomes a D.J. at a club after drinking there with a professor from the academy, and frequents a variety of bars that cater to women and men, both queer and straight. However, it is interesting to note that Garréta seems to foreground other

aspects of identity in the text, such as race and class, even as her writing precludes the existence of gender and by extension fixed sexual identity. For example, A\*\*\* is black and moved to Paris from Harlem. And *je*, a relatively affluent white Parisian with no observable family (save a deceased grandmother whose apartment *je* inherits) develops close relationships with A\*\*\*'s family in New York. One might hence suggest that Garréta's writing argues both explicitly and implicitly that although the notion of gender requires fluid conceptualizations (or even annihilation altogether), other aspects of personhood such as race and class are not mutable or permeable artifices but rather demand socioculturally contextualized recognition.

In another of Garréta's works entitled *Pas un jour* (2002),<sup>15</sup> the focus is not on the preclusion of gender but on a constant destabilization—that is to say a queering—of subjectivity itself. In the *ante scriptum* to the novel, she explains that her project is to randomly recollect memories of women and desire, and to alphabetize them:

Tu t'assigneras cinq heures [...] chaque jour, un mois durant, à ton ordinateur, te donnant pour objet de raconter le souvenir que tu as d'une femme ou autre que tu as désirée ou qui t'a désirée. Le récit ne sera que cela, le dévidage de la mémoire dans le cadre strict d'un moment déterminé. [...] Tu les prendras dans l'ordre où elles te reviendront à l'esprit. Tu les coucheras ensuite dans l'ordre impersonnel de l'alphabet.<sup>16</sup>

The text is composed of an *ante scriptum*, a *post scriptum*, and a series of twelve narratives positioned alphabetically in the book although in the table they are listed chronologically by the night they were written. In the very least, this strategy incites two discrete reading approaches—alphabetical and chronological. Although many of the distinct narratives do contain metatextual references to the writing project itself, the content of each is entirely independent from the others on a mimetic level; each experience of desire is contained within its own *nuit* and there is no overlap between the women or occurrences invoked. The novel's narrative continuity is intentionally fragmentary, lending a certain randomness to memories Garréta endeavors to render (more) “impersonnel” by consigning them to the alphabet.

The inherent structural fragmentation in *Pas un jour* is bolstered by Garréta's stylistics in ways that definitively interrogate the cohesiveness of “subjectivity.” The author's heavy usage of punctuation—particularly ellipses and parentheses—and frequent fluctuations between narration in the present and past that weave together philosophical reflections (*essais*) and autofictional accounts (*histoires*) encourage the reader to replace

notions of fixed subjectivity with the concept of individuations of being, each individuation existing autonomously and in situational particularity. Here, for example, the continuity of the *récit* is broken:

Tu t'ennuyais donc mortellement à ce colloque où l'on avait réuni, sous tu ne sais plus quelle prétexte, une palette d'universitaires et d'écrivains divers. (Il te suffirait de fouiller dans une des piles de dossiers qui encombre ton bureau et en quoi se résume l'archive de ta vie objective pour retrouver le programme du colloque et le texte que tu y prononças, mais à quoi bon? [...]).<sup>17</sup>

This parenthetical interjection acts as a sort of theatrical aside that draws the reader's attention to the fabrication of Garréta's narrative—not necessarily fabrication in the fictitious sense, but rather as it might connote the creation of a text crafted from the interplay of *remémoration* and the author's explicit references to the unique writing challenge she sets out to realize via this recollection.

At other points in the novel, a slippage in verb tenses creates a sort of *mise en abyme* that infinitely complicates the text and its narrative voice. The section entitled "E\*" is of particular interest in this respect. During this night of writing, *tu* recounts having met a novelist at a conference with whom she engaged in frequent debates before perusing one of her novels for long enough to be able to discuss it with her at dinner—all of which is narrated in the *imparfait* and *passé simple* tenses:

On se sépara donc après dîner sur un excellent sentiment et tu regagnas ta chambre d'hôtel [...] Tu étais en caleçon et la brosse à dents en main lorsque le téléphone sonna. Ta romancière te proposait de la rejoindre au bar prendre un dernier verre. Ça ou l'insomnie...Tu renfilas ton pantalon et pris l'ascenseur.<sup>18</sup>

It is at this moment in the text that the narration shifts into the present tense: "Tu es assise [...] Le bar est [...] Elle parle de [...]."<sup>19</sup> This interlude continues in the present tense and ends with *tu* going back up to her room. But the text becomes cyclic as we read once again: "Tu étais en caleçon et la brosse à dents en main lorsque le téléphone sonna."<sup>20</sup> However, this time *tu* ventures to E\*'s room and they engage in a sexual encounter, the past tense narration of which ends as abruptly as the act itself:

A quel moment s'emparerait-elle de ta main pour la forcer, la contraindre à conclure, la fixer dans sa chair et d'un coup de reins se délivrer de l'insoutenable fuite du plaisir? Mais c'est le temps de la remémoration qui

à présent te presse de conclure. Le réveil a sonné. Tu te souviens avoir interrompu ta caresse inachevée.<sup>21</sup>

In this *récit*, Garréta playfully collapses the distinction between a sexual act and a textual one—between a moment charged with erotic tension and a narration that leaves the reader with a sense of *inachèvement* that parallels that of E\*. The author's narrative voice is neither anchored to the present nor the past, but is in constant oscillation as myriad individuations of *tu*.

Although the narrative voice is almost always referenced as *tu*, the subject pronoun *je* does appear in three different passages, further accentuating the instability of subjectivity in the novel.<sup>22</sup> In the most striking example, Garréta underscores this rupture between *tu* and *je* with her characteristic parentheses, ellipsis, and question mark:

Tu ne le savais pas alors, t'en tenant au concept confortable d'une amitié qui aurait digressé en désir, tu ne le savais pas encore au moment d'entreprendre la rédaction de cette nuit, mais tu as aimé K\*, et j'éprouve soudain avec cinq ans de retard la douleur d'avoir perdu une femme que j'aimais (—que tu aimais?... ) sans l'avoir jamais su.<sup>23</sup>

Given that 'I' (*je*) and 'you' (*tu*) are grammatically opposed pronouns in the instance of discourse,<sup>24</sup> it seems as though the inherent tension within Garréta's second person narrative voice is only further exacerbated by these passages where 'I' is written after all. In more ways than one, the following commentary in the *ante scriptum* does metatextually shed light on the question of cohesive subjectivity in the text: "On ne peut plus radicalement différer ni dissembler de soi-même que tu entreprends ici de le faire."<sup>25</sup> Of course, on one level it can be read as an attestation that this project is anything but typical of the way Garréta writes. But it is equally important to note the irony of writing that one cannot differ more from oneself than 'you' ('I' in the autofictional guise of 'you') are setting out to do in undertaking such a project. In *Pas un jour*, Garréta succeeds in undermining the commonly accepted diametric opposition between these pronouns. Unsurprisingly, our understanding of the narrative voice is troubled even more in the *post scriptum* as it is explained that at least one of these "recollected" stories is in truth a pure fabrication, and the reader is encouraged to actively "cherche[r] la fiction."<sup>26</sup> By fluctuating between two genres, between narrative and essay, Anne F. Garréta draws our attention to the perpetually shifting ground upon which identity is constructed and interrogates the cohesiveness of "subjectivity" itself.

Whereas Garréta's work precludes the notion of gender (in the case of *Sphinx*) and irrefutably problematizes fixed subjectivity (in the case of *Pas un jour*), Nina Bouraoui's *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005)<sup>27</sup> emphasizes polyvocality, infinitely complicating and multiplying subjectivity. Here, being is conceptualized in constellations, not only with other people but also with cultural and geographical bodies—the Algeria of Bouraoui's father and her mother's France, for example, or the waters of the Mediterranean as she swims. The text is a plurality of narratives woven together and thus nothing about the narrative voice *je* is permanently identifiable. Written as a single paragraph, even the form of the novel is expansive and consuming, creating a structural fluidity that complements the protean nature of the narrative voice. The text itself is addressed as a confession to the author's therapist that opens with: "Je viens vous voir parce que j'ai des mauvaises pensées," and closes with: "Quand je viens vous voir, je garde l'idée d'une confession."<sup>28</sup> The resemblance of these opening and closing sentences gives the narrative a circular quality, gesturing towards a continuation of this stream of consciousness ad infinitum. As Bouraoui comments numerous times throughout the book, hers is an "écriture qui saigne."<sup>29</sup> In this way, when an event or recurring experience from the past is recounted, it is nearly always in the present tense, as though it is being re/experienced in the moment it is written, in the moment it is shared with "docteur C":

Avec vous, je suis dans la vie,<sup>30</sup> dans ma vie, dans ses replis et c'est une façon pour moi de retrouver l'écriture, de la fouiller ou de la fonder, je sais, je comprends mieux, j'écris sur le sensible, c'est une écriture vivante, je suis un auteur vivant, la disparition de l'écriture est aussi l'effacement du sentiment de vie ; l'abandon, c'est la mort, l'absence c'est la mort, parce que j'ai si peur pour ma mère, quand elle traverse les rues d'Alger, quand elle rentre par la route moutonnaire, quand elle dit, à la campagne: « Je vais derrière le champ, les marguerites me semblent plus grandes. » Elle est là et elle n'est plus là.<sup>31</sup>

In a single sentence, Bouraoui's narrative voice picks up threads of memories of the past and weaves them into the present with a simple "parce que." The author's notion and implementation of "écriture qui saigne"—of "écriture vivante"—invites us to reconceptualize the relationship between physical bodies in time and space and writing as an instrument of material connection. Whereas Hélène Cixous posited *écriture féminine*<sup>32</sup> as a consubstantial correlation between writing and the body through which women might escape phallogocentric tradition,