

# **Sexuality and Corporeality**

**In the Work of Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston and Nelly Arcan**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis discusses the representation of sexuality and corporeality in the work of Francophone authors Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston and Nelly Arcan, including a range of genres and drawing from their earliest publications to the most recent. It takes as its main objects of study the female body, and women's sexual development, experience and pleasure. In order, it examines the authors' perspectives on the following issues: dominant sexual discourses (mostly pornography and the media), sexual difference, the sexual representation of others (especially prostitutes and porn-stars), women's writing and the body politic. As the first comparative study of its kind, this thesis sheds light on the largely unexplored similarities between these authors' works, as well as their relevance to contemporary women's writing in French and to feminism more generally (despite evidence to the contrary). It asks: How is women's sexuality informed by dominant sexual discourses, and in what ways do the authors proffer a productive counter-narrative? How do they understand the gendered nature of women's situation, and to what extent do they resist or reinforce this? And how far does this extend to all women? Indeed, how do the authors represent other women in the first place? Finally, how do they define the body, and what is the relationship between the multiple bodies inside and outside of the text (including the authors' own)? By responding to these questions, this thesis reveals how Ernaux, Huston and Arcan's writing operates unrelentingly in the interest of female sexual and corporeal desire, remaining sensitive to the differences between women's backgrounds and experiences. In so doing, it concludes that their literature constitutes an innovative and important blueprint for more nuanced representations of feminine identity that, despite conflicting appearances, constitute a potent force against patriarchal systems and misogynist dogma.

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## Introduction

Contemporary women's writing in French across the Francophone world is as vast in scope as it is in volume, and numerous specialists within the field have identified the difficulty inherent in mapping shared practices and outlooks. Texts differ drastically in terms of thematic content, regional context, narrative structures and socio-political agendas, and the many cross-overs between disciplinary, gendered, theoretical and generic<sup>1</sup> boundaries characteristic of our postmodern age complicate matters all the more.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly pertinent when it comes to establishing the relevance of literature by female writers for feminism and for women more generally in our current epoch. Many of the works produced over the last decade, for instance the controversial narratives of Virginie Despentes, Catherine Millet, Christine Angot, Catherine Breillat, Marie Darieussecq, Catherine Cusset, Marie-Sissi Labrèche, to name but a few, are deliberately provocative in their representations of women, who are often depicted as dangerously dehumanised and hyper-sexualised, mentally unhinged to the point of being caricatural, or excessively dominant and violent, enacting roles and behaviours usually adopted by men within popular culture.<sup>3</sup> Such images reinforce or at best invert existing patriarchal structures and hegemonic portrayals of female identity. On the other hand, these works resist standardised ideals of feminine behaviour precisely through these fictional women's sexual and social deviance, and by grappling with taboo and timely topics concerning women's bodies and their sexuality: prostitution, pornography, rape, abortion, menstruation, eating disorders, the menopause and perversions of all kinds.<sup>4</sup> The shock-value of these topics reminds us that the road is still long to the validation of female desire, and to the prospect of women's needs, bodily processes and testimonials of sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley Jordan, 'Etat présent: Autofiction in the Feminine', *French Studies*, 67.1 (2013), 76-84 (p. 76).

Autofiction is especially popular amongst women writers in France of late, ever since a 'turn' in the 1990s. Gill Rye, 'Introduction', in *Experiment and Experience: Women's Writing in France 2000-2010*, ed. by Gill Rye and Amaleena Damlé (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 1-10 (p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> Shirley Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 32-33 and 54.

Michèle Schaal, *Une Troisième vague féministe et littéraire : Les Femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération* (Boston : Brill, 2017), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Schaal, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

violence being addressed in an open and meaningful way. Such forms of subjugation are being dismantled at ever greater speed by women around the world, as with the #MeToo movement, the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign in Ireland, the well-mediatised protesting of rape cases in Spain and India, the re-evaluation of prostitution laws in Canada, to name just a few influential shifts. In short, contemporary women's writing in French is characterised by transgression and resistance to our present state of affairs, in alignment with current socio-political change.

Recent women's literature also teaches us a great deal about how women's experiences fluctuate in accordance with their racial, class, regional, religious and cultural background, and authors are showing a growing awareness of what the feminine condition might mean for members of the queer community.<sup>5</sup> Feminism of the 60s and 70s in particular has been critiqued by historians for privileging a 'generation of young, largely white, and educated women',<sup>6</sup> which feminism in its third-wave has sought (and is seeking) to redress. Still today, as Shirley Jordan points out, many erotic texts reflect a distrust on the part of contemporary women authors regarding the concept of *écriture féminine* or a quintessentially feminine writing style, owing to its reductive quality, and Michèle Schaal claims that young feminists reject the potentially exclusive terms 'nous' and 'Femme(s)'.<sup>7</sup> Now more than ever, then, universal notions of female identity are the object of serious suspicion. This growing diversification extends to feminist platforms, with some authors like Darieussecq experimenting with alternative ways of disseminating their literature through the internet, a fashion fitting for an era of globalisation and transnationalism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Schaal, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 27-28, 31, 35, 44 and 292., and [Forthcoming] Margaret Attack, with Alison S. Fell and others, 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion', in *Making Waves*, ed. by Margaret Attack and others (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2019) [pp. currently unavailable].

<sup>6</sup> Attack, with Fell and others, 'Introduction' [pp. currently unavailable]. Though Attack *et al.* do point out that second-wave feminism showed some awareness of and interest in racial difference amongst women, in the seminal text *Les Femmes s'entêtent. Ibid.* [pp. currently unavailable].

<sup>7</sup> Jordan, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 and 57-58.  
Schaal, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Gill Rye and Amaleena Damlé, 'Conclusion', in *Experiment and Experience*, pp. 211-212 (p. 211).



Today's literature by women in France and beyond is thus symptomatic of the changing face of feminism. What has come to be known as a fourth-wave of feminism has incorporated cumulatively inclusive strategies and perspectives, as well as a renewed investment in civil activism with a specific focus on sexual assault and work-based misogyny; all bolstered by technological advances and online networking.<sup>9</sup> Lest we forget moreover, this current wave is as divided as others before, as split reactions to FEMEN's militant tactics, the #balancetonporc campaign and Catherine Deneuve's recent letter to *Le Monde* have made abundantly clear. Numerous theorists have been led to conclude that if anything is to define feminism now (otherwise post-, neo- or even meta-feminism should we opt for Lori Saint-Martin's neologism<sup>10</sup>) it is this transgressive modality, that seeks to overstep the mark of propriety and fixed categorisation.<sup>11</sup> It is with this knowledge in mind that Jordan speaks of a 'fuzzy feminism' and Amaleena Damlé of a 'slipperiness' inherent to contemporary women's writing in French.<sup>12</sup> What we can assert with certainty however, is that contemporary women writers within the Francophone world are preoccupied with exploring and representing sex, sexuality and the body, from an intersectional and transgressive viewpoint.

It is for this reason that I have chosen to address sexuality and corporeality throughout this thesis, emphasising a trend in erotically charged stories and voices. Martin Crowley and Victoria Best, for instance, have identified a surge in the production of pornographic materials in France, and Jordan claims cultural production in France and the Western world 'sustains an appetite for intimacy'.<sup>13</sup> Women's writing contributes meaningfully to this shift, with sex now an

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<sup>9</sup> Schaal tentatively proposes the emergence of a fourth-wave, though she asserts that there are many crossovers between this wave and a third. Schaal, *op. cit.*, pp. 291-292.

<sup>10</sup> On these forms of feminism, see: Lori Saint-Martin, 'Le Métaféminisme et la nouvelle prose féminine au Québec', *Voix et images*, 18.1 (1992), 78-88 (p. 83).; Marine Gheno, 'Dystopie au féminin chez Nelly Arcan : Lecture métaféministe', *Canada and Beyond*, 3.1-2 (2013), 123-139 (p. 134).; Christine Authier, *Le Nouvel ordre sexuel* (Paris : Bartillat, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Schaal, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

Amaleena Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2014), p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Crowley and Victoria Best, *New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), p. 4.

Shirley Jordan, 'Close-up and Impersonal: Sexual/Textual Bodies in Contemporary French Women's Writing', *Nottingham French Studies*, 45.3 (2006), 8-23 (p. 22).

unprecedentedly prevalent element of women's fiction'; Jordan asserting that 'French women writers' intensive focus on sex is one of the most striking features of the literary world in the 1990s and beyond.'<sup>14</sup> Given its striking quality, a close examination of this focus on sex and the intimate should prove a worthwhile enterprise within women's literary studies. Throughout, I will endeavour to remain attentive to variances in female experience and the ways in which the authors address these, and will explore sexual and textual transgressions alike; extending my analysis, for instance, to the relationship between images and texts, the body and the word, and to a range of texts, including novels, autobiographies, critical essays and various paratexts.

My chosen authors, Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston and Nelly Arcan, are perhaps a less obvious choice. The autobiographies of Annie Ernaux appear in several anthologies of contemporary women's writing, yet her literary track record makes her a more evident writer to study in relation to earlier writers dealing with gender inequality and sexism in a traditional sense: fighting for the right to work and write in the same way as men, and following in the constructionist footsteps of Simone de Beauvoir. Alternatively, her style and key messages have been compared to those of several life writers and artists, ranging from Sophie Calle to Marcel Proust,<sup>15</sup> and her work is studied on countless occasions in relation to the philosophy of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>16</sup> Ernaux herself paid tribute to Bourdieu in *Le Monde* in the wake of his death, and contributed to a collective retrospective edited by fellow

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<sup>14</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Extensive comparative studies include : Ania Wroblewski, *La Vie des autres : Sophie Calle et Annie Ernaux, artistes hors-la-loi* (Montréal : PU Montréal, 2016); Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux, Macé* (New York: Legenda, 2013); Cathy Jellenik, *Rewriting Rewriting: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, and Marie Redonnet* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> For example: Joseph Hurt, 'La Transmission d'une expérience de dominés : Pierre Bourdieu, Annie Ernaux', in *Imaginaire et transmission*, ed. by A. Soron and A. Lerhmitte (Bordeaux : PU Bordeaux, 2017), pp. 96-110.; Lyn Thomas, 'Reading and Writing with Bourdieu: Popular and Literary Intertexts in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*', *Institute for the Study of European Transformations*, 4 (2008), pp. 1-21.; Isabelle Charpentier, interview with Annie Ernaux, 'La Littérature est une arme de combat', in *Rencontres avec Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. by Gerard Mauger (Broissieux : Croquant, 2005), pp. 159-175.

socio-ethnographer and autobiographer Edouard Louis.<sup>17</sup> Through these diverse studies, critics argue for the originality of Ernaux's work in terms of sociological evidence as well as visual and written representation. Where studies have explored sexual experience in her work specifically, the focus is largely geared towards *Passion simple*<sup>18</sup> and *L'Usage de la photo*,<sup>19</sup> with noticeably less interest invested in the remainder of her corpus. As for Nancy Huston, her work is seldom examined in terms of its erotic content (aside from *Infrarouge* perhaps<sup>20</sup>), with critics preferring to hone in on her transnational identity and oeuvre, or her portrayal of the mother figure.<sup>21</sup> Nelly Arcan fits more neatly with a study on contemporary women's writing, belonging to a younger generation and having worked as a porn-star and prostitute, and much attention has already rightly been devoted to her depiction of

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<sup>17</sup> Annie Ernaux, 'Bourdieu : Le Chagrin', *Le Monde*, 5 February 2002.

Annie Ernaux, 'La Distinction, œuvre totale et révolutionnaire', in *Pierre Bourdieu :*

*L'Insoumission en héritage*, ed. by Edouard Louis (Paris : PU France, 2013), pp. 17-48.

<sup>18</sup> Most recently: Nathalie Edwards, "'Ecrire pour ne plus avoir honte": Christine Angot's and Annie Ernaux's Shameless Bodies', in *The Female Face of Shame*, ed. by Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013), pp. 61-73.;

Francesca Forcolin, 'L'Intime en scène. L'Obscénité du corps dans l'écriture de Christine Angot et Annie Ernaux', in *Autour de l'extrême littéraire*, ed. by Alastair Hemmens and Russell Williams (Newcastle upon Tyne : Cambridge Scholars, 2012), pp. 150-161.;

Joëlle Papillon, 'Ernaux ou la traversée des genres : Entre *Passion simple* et *Se perdre*', *Voix plurielles*, 6.1 (2009), 1-8.

<sup>19</sup> The list is much more extensive for *L'Usage*, with the following being produced within the last few years alone: Shirley Jordan, 'Interfaces: Verbal/Visual Experiment in New Women's Writing in French', in *Women's Writing in Twenty First-Century France* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2013), pp. 196-211.;

Andrea Oberhuber, 'Épiphanie du corps dans *L'Usage de la photo* d'Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie', *Revue-analyses*, 11.1 (2016), pp. 160-193.;

Lisa Connell, 'Picturing Pain and Pleasure in Annie Ernaux's *L'Usage de la photo*', *French Forum*, 39.2-3 (2014), 145-160.;

Akane Kawakami, 'Annie Ernaux, 1989: Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection', *Nottingham French Studies*, 53.2 (2014), 232-246.;

Karin Schwerdtner, 'Désir et relation. *L'Usage de la photo*, Annie Ernaux/Marc Marie', in *Mythes et érotismes dans les littératures et les cultures francophones de l'extrême contemporain*, ed. by Efstratia Oktapoda (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 97-112.

<sup>20</sup> See [Forthcoming] Diana Holmes, 'Bad Sex/Good Sex: Nancy Huston and the Boundaries of Erotic Writing', *L'Esprit Créateur* (2019) [pp. currently unavailable].

<sup>21</sup> The full list is too long to name, but the most exhaustive works on these subjects to the best of my knowledge, are: Kate Averis' monograph *Exile and Nomadism in French and Hispanic Women's Writing* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014), the collection of essays *Vision/Division: L'Œuvre de Nancy Huston*, ed. by Marta Dvořák and Jane Koustas (Ottawa : Ottawa UP, 2004), and Angela Guarino's master's thesis, 'La Réinvention de la maternité dans l'œuvre de Nancy Huston' (unpublished master's thesis, Université de Montréal, 2009).

sexual experience and the sex industry. Comparative studies have mostly assimilated her works to those of equally provocative writers, such as the aforementioned and infamous Despentès, Millet, Angot and Labrèche.<sup>22</sup>

It is my belief, however, that each of these authors' corpuses, and not just Arcan's, warrants close examination in terms of its erotic content. As this thesis hopes to demonstrate, each author equips us with inordinately rich and complex portrayals of sexual and corporeal experience that compete with more recent entrants onto the Francophone erotic scene. Furthermore, each has established an unquestionably successful literary career for themselves in France and Quebec, with considerable international impact. Between them, they have been nominated for close to twenty literary prizes (winning many), have repeatedly occupied bestseller spots, and Ernaux and Huston have been awarded honorary degrees from l'Université de Cergy-Pontoise (Ernaux), l'Université de Liège and the University of Ottawa (Huston). All three authors' works also feature on national school and university syllabuses and have been translated into several languages. This unremitting popularity is partly owing, I would argue, to a balance in their work between theory, experimental language and more commonplace prose and tropes, which diversifies and extends their readerly appeal.

The erotic writing of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan thus provides a wide-ranging insight into contemporary women's writing in French – temporally, nationally and formally –, and a reliable indication of the types of representation of the female body

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<sup>22</sup> Comparisons with these three authors include: Tomasz Swoboda, 'Constructions de la subjectivité dans la littérature érotique féminine', *Romanica Silesiana*, 8 (2013), 85-93., and Roger Chamberland, 'Les Machines désirantes et l'écriture du sexe : Les Femmes et de la littérature', *Erudit*, 128 (2003), 43-46.

Comparative studies about these authors are mostly to be found, though, amongst Canadian postgraduate theses. They are in abundance: Marine Gheno, 'Femmes scandaleuses : Le Pouvoir transformatif de la transgression chez Virginie Despentès, Nelly Arcan et aurélia aurita' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Alberta, 2016); Christine Denis, 'Ball and chain suivi de Liberté et conséquences : Libération des mœurs dans la littérature contemporaine féminine, les cas de *Baise-moi* de Virginie Despentès et *Folle* de Nelly Arcan' (unpublished master's thesis, Université Laval, 2013); Louise Krauth, 'Représentation du sexe chez N. Arcan, V. Despentès, M.S. Labrèche et C. Millet' (unpublished master's thesis, Université de Montréal, 2011); Marie-Claude Dugas, 'Corps, identité et féminité chez Nelly Arcan et Marie-Sissi Labrèche' (unpublished master's thesis, Université de Montréal, 2010); Valérie Bouchard, 'Femme-sujet ou femme-objet : Le Corps féminin chez Marie-Sissi Labreche, Nelly Arcan et Clara Ness' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Ottawa, 2007).

and sexuality celebrated within the Francophone imaginary. This is all the truer given their regional backgrounds and generic preferences. Ernaux is a teacher and distinguished author of two novels and over twenty autobiographical publications, which recount her experiences of working-class girl- and womanhood in France as far back as the 1940s; Huston is a Calgary-born, Paris-based author whose career took off in the 1980s, with works ranging from novels to screenplays, philosophical essays to children's books, focussing on transnationalism, bilingualism, gender and maternity; Arcan is a Quebecois writer who committed suicide in 2009 at the age of 36, having time to publish only a handful of autofictional (largely psychoanalytical) works on the themes of prostitution, pornography and beauty norms. In short, each is born at a different time in a different place, and their corpuses diverge greatly in size and focus. It is partly for this reason that I have selected them, to provide a substantial overview of contemporary women's writing: one which extends beyond the Hexagon, and accounts for the feminine condition at multiple stages of its history.

This diversity across and between the authors' corpuses might, at first sight, throw into question the validity of a comparative study. In fact, critics have yet to examine their works collectively. Upon closer inspection, however, there is much which connects these authors that requires careful attention, namely the paradoxes that populate their literature. Ernaux has historically fought for women to be granted the same rights and societal opportunities as men, critiquing the targeted education of girls and boys that over-emphasises girls' physical appearance and justifies their objectification. And yet, she blithely confesses to a strict beauty regime and obsessive love affairs, to which she offers herself with self-destructive abandon. She thus abides by the same oppressive clichés of feminine identity which she herself deplors. Huston is likewise concerned with overstepping gender difference and challenging normative ideals of femininity in her novels, but upholds a controversially essentialist argument and strand of evolutionary thinking within her critical essays. As a means of justifying her views, Huston implicates Arcan in the process by labelling her work biologically determinist (though, as we will see, this has been hotly contested). Mainly though, the cause for debate where Arcan is concerned is her dual persona as philosopher and prostitute, as writer and highly sexualised public figure. Her semi-fictional female characters and narrative voices are similarly puzzling for readers: they condemn patriarchal schemata and

misogynistic depictions of women, yet seem to acquiesce to these with alarmingly zestful commitment. All three writers therefore employ what Sarah Kofman calls a 'double strategy', whereby an author can put forward two polarised theses through two different modes of expression.<sup>23</sup> If contemporary women writers are 'fuzzy' or 'slippery', Ernaux, Huston and Arcan go a step further by contradicting their own points of view, declining to yield singular answers.

In a similar vein, they blur the boundary between fiction and non-fiction (chiefly autobiography), the visual and textual, and their literature straddles multiple styles, forms, genres and disciplines. They also broach the same abject feminine experiences (such as rape and abortion), the same trying phases of sexual development (puberty, menstruation, the menopause and ageing), and a similar sense of isolation when they or their characters lose their virginity, sell their bodies or enter into an affair with a married man. In spite of these interests, each of them intimates a certain unease when it comes to the words feminine or feminist. Ernaux refuses the label woman writer, and disassociates herself from pivotal feminist collective MLF (*Mouvement de libération des femmes*), refusing as she puts it 'le discours féministe essentialiste'; Huston states, during her appearance at the 2016 *Etonnants voyageurs* festival in Saint-Malo, that she is uncomfortable being deemed a feminist given her comparable interest in male-specific issues; and Arcan's hyper-sexualisation undermines her feminist rhetoric in the eyes of many.<sup>24</sup> Again, they evade fixed categorisation, guarded somewhat against feminism despite their feminist legacies. Finally, their works are interrelated because Huston would have it so. Huston and Ernaux appear on television together, with Huston endorsing Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* and its inclusion in French curriculums, and though unable to meet Arcan during her lifetime Huston takes part in an invented interview with her conducted by Claudia Larochelle as part of a published homage (*Je veux une maison faite de sorties de secours*). Karine Rosso later imagines them in

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Kofman, 'An Interview', *New Political Science*, 15.3-4 (1994), 23-31 (pp. 24-25).

<sup>24</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric Yves-Jeannet*, with postscript by Annie Ernaux (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), p. 95.

Grégoire Sauvage, 'Littérature sans frontières : Nancy Huston, romancière canadienne', *Radio France internationale*, 15 May 2016.

Famously shown during an interview with Guy Lepage. Arcan retaliates with a critical article entitled 'La Honte' (chapter two). Guy Lepage, *Tout le monde en parle*, ICI Radio-Canada Télé, 16 September 2007.

conversation in ‘Nelly Arcan et Nancy Huston en dialogue’.<sup>25</sup> During her 2016 conference ‘Belle comme une image’ given at the Wolubilis centre in Brussels, Huston also urges that the work of Ernaux and Arcan be covered during compulsory sex education classes nationwide.<sup>26</sup> To summarise, it seems to me that there is more that unites these authors than separates them. The paradoxes and contradictions which they uphold in their work are also striking in their number and incongruity, and beg a methodical working-out. Such is what the following comparative analysis hopes to achieve, shedding new light on Ernaux, Huston and Arcan’s understandings of the female body and sexuality, as well as what this means from a feminist standpoint. In so doing, I will present them as crucial contributors to women’s writing and its contemporary canon.

My chapters are designed according to themes rather than individual authors, enabling me to emphasise the similarities outlined above. Each chapter is subsequently divided into three sections: one per author. The first two chapters will focus on two key aspects of sexuality: the first exploring sexual experience and its representation in sexual discourses, the second consisting in a review of sexual difference. Naturally, the concept of the body will be central to these chapters. For my third, I will elaborate an intersectional angle on sex, sexuality and the body. In the fourth and final chapter, I will build on the conceptualisation of the (primarily female) body central to this thesis, exploring this time the relationship between the body of the authors, their readers and the text itself; in a nutshell, between *corps* and *corpus*. The questions I hope to unpack are as follows: firstly, how are women’s bodies and sexual experiences presented in dominant sexual discourses, and how does this impact on their sexual identity? And in what ways do my studied authors proffer a productive counter-narrative? Secondly, a critique of this type of hegemonic representation of women’s bodies and sexuality implies that these representations are at odds with the reality of women’s experiences, or inform them in negative ways. In that case, what do the studied authors understand by the

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<sup>25</sup> Claudia Larochelle, ‘Le Rendez-vous manqué’, in *Je veux une maison faite de sorties de secours*, ed. by Claudia Larochelle (Montréal : VLB Editeur, 2015), pp. 24-27.  
Karine Rosso, ‘Nelly Arcan et Nancy Huston en dialogue’, in *Nelly Arcan : Trajectoires fulgurantes*, ed. by Isabelle Boisclair and others (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2017), pp. 63-86.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Huston, ‘Belle comme une image’, *Wolubilis*, 16 March 2016.

feminine condition and how it comes to be, and how do they resist or reinforce these gendered structures and their origins? Thirdly, if we can establish what Ernaux, Huston and Arcan understand by women's sexuality, how far does this extend to all women in the same way? How is women's bodily and sexual experience in their works informed by different ethnic and cultural heritages? Finally, how far are the authors' bodies themselves and their bodies of work reflective of other women's experiences? And how are the authors and their fictional characters' bodily and sexual experiences translated or conveyed within writing in the first place? In short, in what senses does their erotic writing serve women and the feminist cause? How does it assist women's bodily and sexual emancipation?

Such questions are a necessary antidote to dominant sexual discourses which have hitherto privileged a male sex drive and fantasy. Cultural theorists, writers and sociologists have drawn attention to the male orientation of films, erotica, pornography, the media, fine art, religion and philosophy, and to women's attendant sexualisation and objectification. Laura Mulvey's analysis of Hollywood movies in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' indicates how camera angles and the positioning of actresses oblige female spectators to identify with male protagonists and viewers, or in other words to adopt a male gaze.<sup>27</sup> Looking to the wider visual realm, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* teaches us that the prevalence of the female nude throughout the history of art has incited women to embody the male gaze: to observe other women and themselves as men might do.<sup>28</sup> I will return to these two seminal texts throughout this thesis. More recently, *Living Dolls* by journalist and activist Nathasha Walter and *Les Filles en série* by novelist and academic Martine Delvaux have provided compelling insights into the problems affecting the postmodern woman (the worldwide web; plastic surgery; posthuman developments), drawing attention to a resurgence of sexism in the twenty-first century. Toys, films, performances, websites and other influential media circulate the self-same image: that of a stereotypically attractive and sexually submissive woman, such as the amenable girl-next-door. The universal message transmitted is that women must comply to a one-size-fits-all model of femininity, joining a homogenous community

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<sup>27</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by Mandy Merck (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 22-34.

<sup>28</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 46-47.



of ‘living dolls’ or ‘filles en séries’.<sup>29</sup> This entails the silencing and dehumanisation of women, and the pressure to subscribe to unattainable standards of beauty carries countless dangers. Delvaux speaks of mental illness and suicide, Walter of anorexia and the unbreakable glass ceiling (women being judged according to their physical appearance rather than their intellectual calibre). The ‘Professional Beauty Qualification’ described in Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* sadly prevails.<sup>30</sup> Women’s object-status, their relegation to the domestic sphere, and their physical sacrifices are reinforced by dominant images of women on-screen and in print. Pornography is a particularly powerful platform, which Gail Dines and others before her – notably Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin – judge to normalise the abuse and rape of real women.<sup>31</sup>

The common consensus thus seems to be that dominant sexual discourses are damaging to women’s autonomy and individuation. The adherence to sexist norms, however, is not always entirely disagreeable, or necessarily harmful. Walter, for one, does not wish to deprive her daughter of the joy to be found in wearing a princess dress to a party.<sup>32</sup> The female figures in Ernaux, Huston and Arcan’s literature similarly enjoy age-old clichés of feminine identity, involving lingerie, cosmetics and submissive sex positions. And yet, their erotic texts also challenge heterosexist ideologies prevalent in dominant sexual discourses; a reminder that not all erotica or pornographic imagery reinforces the status quo. Laurence O’toole in *Pornocopia* and

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<sup>29</sup> Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010), p. 102. Martine Delvaux, *Les Filles en série : Des Barbies aux Pussy Riot* (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2013), p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf explains that women’s beauty is becoming increasingly factored into their job requirements, in fields now very far removed from ‘the original display professions’ where appearance might have been something to take into consideration. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 15. It is worth remembering that Wolf considered the beauty myth to be a recent phenomenon, kickstarted by the Industrial Revolution. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Dines, like many before her, shows a correlation between the increased viewing of pornography with a rise in racist attitudes and paedophilic tendencies. Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), pp. 118 and 94-160.

See also, in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000): Catharine A. MacKinnon, ‘The Roar on the Other Side of Silence’, pp. 130-153 (p. 132).;

Catharine A. MacKinnon, ‘Only Words’, pp. 94-120 (p. 102).;

Andrea Dworkin, ‘Suffering and Speech’, pp. 154-165 (p. 161).;

Diana E. H. Russell, ‘Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model’, pp. 48-93 (p. 88).

<sup>32</sup> Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

Brian McNair in *Porno? Chic!*, for one, contend that pornography offers a means of disrupting heteronormative and patriarchal constructs.<sup>33</sup> My first chapter will argue that Ernaux, Huston and Arcan critique dominant sexual discourses, and create characters who adhere to patterns proper to these discourses; a creative decision that might seem counter-productive. I will argue, however, that my studied authors recuperate and reinvent potentially oppressive tropes through their erotic language and imagery, to make them work in the interest of an empowering feminist agenda. In so doing I hope to deliver an answer of sorts to the existing literature surrounding this paradox in Arcan's corpus, and to unpick ones largely unaccounted for in critical work on Ernaux and Huston. I will first deal with their more or less explicit critiques of dominant discourses, before turning to how they offer alternatives, through which strong female voices and protagonists take charge of erotic action and production.

These female figures and others in the work of the studied authors are unequivocally feminine, despite their resistance to certain social expectations of women. They are far removed from Desportes' masculine heroines, or from the non-binary model very much in vogue amongst feminist scholars, typified at its extreme by Donna Haraway's fluid cyborg that bridges the gap between the animal and the technological.<sup>34</sup> Their erotic literature therefore leaves itself open to criticism. Ernaux's has been criticised for narrating hackneyed erotic scenes and female parts within them, Huston for her essentialist theorisation of gender roles, and Arcan for her hyper-feminised and hyper-sexualised female characters. If their portrayal of women can be seen as anachronistic, however, it is also progressive in so far as it acknowledges the prevailing influence of gender stereotypes and difficulty of performing outside of our prescribed genders. Voicing specifically female bodily and sexual experiences is also essential given their relative historic underrepresentation and the continuing need to legitimise female bodily and sexual pleasure. Most importantly, I will demonstrate how conformity to certain gender norms in their literature actually enables other more problematic stereotypes to be contested and subverted. In my reading of Ernaux, I will argue this case in relation to Loraine Day,

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<sup>33</sup> See Laurence O'toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), and Brian McNair, *How Pornography Changed the World and Made it a Better Place* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association of Books, 1991).

Natalie Edwards, Siobhan McIlvanney, Barbara Havercroft and Fabrice Thumerel's studies of class and shame in her literature.<sup>35</sup> As for Huston, criticism of her essentialist theory overlooks the juxtaposition between this stance in her critical essays and a conflicting one in her fictional prose, and it is this omission which I seek to redress.<sup>36</sup> In the third section, I will add to the ongoing debate concerning Arcan's literature, which seeks to establish whether her essentialist rhetoric is to be taken at face value, or as satire. I will examine a large array of Ernaux's works to delineate a trajectory from class shame to pride, in the course of which sexual difference becomes a weapon not a hindrance. In the second section, I will contrast Huston's essentialist tract in *Reflets dans un œil d'homme* to more measured arguments in other critical essays and markedly more fluid depictions of gender identity in her fiction, taking two novels as examples. To finish, I will examine essentialist elements in Arcan's autofiction and essays, with particular attention to the article 'L'Enfant dans le miroir' where Arcan discusses women's psychosexual development.

"What" these authors mean by women's identity is complicated all the more by additional modes of difference. Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde and bell hooks paved the way for an intersectional feminism, emphasising the extent to which women's experiences are informed by their race.<sup>37</sup> They signal a move

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<sup>35</sup> Loraine Day, 'Class, Sexuality and Subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires Vides*', in *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Margaret Attack and Phil Powrie (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990), pp. 41-55.;

Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 63.;

Siobhan McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return of Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001);

Barbara Havercroft, 'Subjectivité féminine et conscience féministe dans *L'Évènement*', in *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, ed. by Fabrice Thumerel (Arras : Artois PU, 2004), pp. 125-138.

Fabrice Thumerel, 'Avant-propos', in *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, pp. 11-36.

<sup>36</sup> For instance: Lori Saint-Martin, 'Ravages de la beauté', *Spirale*, 244 (2013), 65-67 (p. 65).

<sup>37</sup> In particular, I am thinking of:

Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981);

Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour', in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, ed. by Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 175-200 (p. 178).;

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (New York: Random House, 1984), pp. 160-164.;

bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), p. 53.

away from what Elizabeth Spelman termed the ‘ampersand problem’, whereby forms of subjugation are considered interdependently as though they affected the subjugated person separately. In Spelman’s words: ‘a Black woman cannot be “female, as opposed to being Black”; she is female and Black.’<sup>38</sup> Taking this logic further, intersectional feminism recognises that not all women are considered female in the same way. Monique Wittig’s *La Pensée straight* teaches us that lesbian women are othered on two counts: as not-man (according to Luce Irigaray’s reading of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic principles, all women must situate themselves in relation to men as not-man with a not-male-sexuality) and not-woman, in being excluded from a heteronormative conceptualisation of feminine identity.<sup>39</sup> Nowadays, feminist collectives encourage an openness towards different sexualities, especially transsexuality which permits a less restrictive understanding of what we mean by the feminine and female. A more conservative approach – that of Germaine Greer expressly – is widely disputed.<sup>40</sup> Additional elements which problematise fixed definitions of the feminine condition include social status, religious affiliation, disability and caring responsibilities, and the current political climate makes im/migration an increasing priority for feminist programmes.

On that note, it has not escaped my notice that the three selected authors are white, heterosexual, able-bodied cis-women, and that this selection might therefore appear less progressive than it should be from an intersectional perspective. Nevertheless, all three authors offer interesting intersectional representations of women that merit and necessitate closer attention. Furthermore, the authors each reckon with forms of alterity that affect their lives as women, namely class and ageing (Ernaux), exile and transnationality (Huston), and social abjection as prostitute and porn-star (Arcan). If anything, moreover, their relatively fortunate position means that their work has not hitherto been greatly examined from an intersectional angle, making it a site ripe for new research. This is extenuated by the fact that, emerging from the USA, intersectional theory is still in its infancy within

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: The Women’s Press, 1988), p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris : Minuit, 1977), pp. 23 and 57-58.  
‘[Le] sujet désigné (lesbienne) N’EST PAS une femme [...]’. Monique Wittig, *La Pensée straight* (Paris : Amsterdam, 2018 [2001]), p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> I am referring to the public response to Germaine Greer, ‘Transgender Women Are “Not Women”’, *Newsnight*, BBC, 24 October 2015.

the Francophone world. The authors' multiple points of privilege are also partly what interests me when it comes to their intersectional representation of other women. How can the studied authors forge an inclusive text without, to use the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'speaking for others'?<sup>41</sup> I will explore how Ernaux, Huston and Arcan employ inventive literary techniques in an attempt to resolve this dilemma, even if it cannot be solved absolutely.

Class is the most pressing issue for Ernaux, as most critics agree, and Lyn Thomas' article 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness' and forthcoming publication on Ernaux's 'Voix blanche' form the foundation for future studies on the intersection of race, ethnicity and religion across her corpus.<sup>42</sup> It is on that basis that I will turn my attention to Ernaux's *journaux extimes*, where she undertakes a more obvious intersectional project by observing people around her. In particular, these works reflect a preoccupation with black identity, ageing, prostitution and the wearing of the veil, and the problems involved in narrating these experiences in which the author has nearly no personal involvement (in contrast to her preceding autobiographical works, resolutely centred on the author's past). To Monika Boehringer's study of otherness and 'voix multiples' in *Journal du dehors*,<sup>43</sup> I will bring *non-lieux* and feminist theory, and analysis of *La Vie extérieure* and *Regarde les lumières mon amour*. Huston's corpus is also inclusive of female figures from BME groups or working-class backgrounds, and of sex workers, as well as homo- or bisexuals. There have been several intersectional readings of Huston's novel *Cantique des plaines* (1993)<sup>44</sup> in light of its dealings with indigeneity, which I will extend to two later novels from the perspective of race, queer identity and prostitution.<sup>45</sup> Arcan, for her part, is primarily concerned with her own

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<sup>41</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp. 66-111 (p. 70).

<sup>42</sup> Lyn Thomas, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15.2 (2006), 159-168., and [Forthcoming] Lyn Thomas, 'Voix blanche? Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms and the Challenge of Intersectionality', in *Making Waves*, pp. 205-223.

<sup>43</sup> Monika Boehringer, 'Paroles d'autrui, paroles de soi : *Journal du dehors* d'Annie Ernaux', *Etudes françaises*, 36.2 (2000), 131-148 (p. 135).

<sup>44</sup> Nancy Huston, *Cantique des plaines* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1993)

<sup>45</sup> Such as: Alice Duhan, "Les Différentes voix qui chantaient dans les noms de ton pays" :

marginalisation and social abjection, believing that her implication in sex work distinguishes her irreversibly from other women (especially writers). On the other hand, she compares her situation to that of disabled men and street-walkers (shown to be more vulnerable than escorts like Arcan), and cites victims of the Rwanda crisis as examples of incomprehensible suffering. In addressing these references and what I will argue to be Arcan's productive self-pity, I will be responding to Isabelle Boisclair, Christina Chung, Joëlle Papillon and Rosso's suggestion in their introduction to *Trajectoires fulgurantes* that more work be dedicated to intersectionality in the work of Nelly Arcan.<sup>46</sup>

In keeping with fluid notions of gender identity and intersectional narratives of womanhood, research into the corporeal within the humanities is now wary of mind-body dualisms, and conceives of bodily borders as permeable entities. The theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty still resonates today, inviting us to conceive of the body only in its relation to other bodies, rejecting a view of the body as a hermetically sealed space.<sup>47</sup> Or if bodily borders must be preserved, Jacques Derrida's understanding of bodily borders as infinite is similarly useful in exactly the opposite way.<sup>48</sup> The body's borders are either erased or diversified. Such perspectives are useful when thinking, as I will, about authors' bodies as connected to those of their readers, and about their fictional characters' bodies being reflective of people outside of the text. However, Elizabeth Grosz declares that the body imagined in the work of Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche and others is indisputably that of a male, meaning 'that the specificities of the female body remain unexplained.'<sup>49</sup> I will counter this imbalance in my final

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Une Carte de l'Alberta à plusieurs voix dans *Cantique des plaines* de Nancy Huston', in *Le Lieu du nord : Vers une cartographie des lieux du nord*, ed. by Daniel Chartier, Maria Walecka-Garbalinska and Stéphanie Bellemare-Page (Montréal : PU Quebec, 2015), pp. 49-62.;

Jacinthe Gillet-Gelly, 'L'Union des voix féminines dans *Cantique des plaines* de Nancy Huston. Pour une déconstruction du métarécit historique', in *Mythes et érotismes*, pp. 59-76.

<sup>46</sup> Isabelle Boisclair and others, 'Avant-Propos', in *Nelly Arcan*, pp. 1-20 (p. 20).

<sup>47</sup> Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: the Substance of the Corporeal* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 128.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1994), pp. xii-xiii.

chapter by focusing on women's bodies in the literature of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan: those of the authors and their characters. After all, as Gill Rye and Carrie Tarr assert, 'it is through the cultural production of women', rather than theory or the academy, 'that the real challenges to ways of thinking about the body are to be found.'<sup>50</sup> This corporeal exploration will enable me to summarise and expand on ideas central to the previous three chapters, and I will likewise produce an overview of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan's corpuses, referring back to many of the texts already studied. In keeping with the overarching interest of my thesis, moreover, I will examine the relationship between the corporeal, sex and sexuality, with a focus on readerly pleasure and *jouissance* as a convenient climax to this thesis.

In the case of Ernaux, I will look to her reflexive journals to outline Ernaux's own take on her writing practice in relation to the corporeal, and what this teaches us about her corpus. This will allow for an extension of Akane Kawakami's study of Ernaux's *journaux intimes* and *extimes*, photodiaries, and pre-writing diary *L'Atelier noir*, looking to two more *journaux réfléchis* and beyond 1989 (Kawakami's chosen focus).<sup>51</sup> An examination of Huston's *Poser nue*, an illustrated oeuvre with artworks by partner Guy Oberson, and her novel *Instruments des ténèbres* will enable me to analyse Huston's commentaries on the female nude, and the merging of authorial, narrative and fictional bodies in her fiction. Our final focus will be the paratext in Arcan's work: peritexts (interviews, a film and documentary) and epitexts (images of herself and other women on the covers of her novels, and alongside her newspaper chronicles). This will enable a broad comprehension of how the author's body, those of other women, and her textual body communicate with one another. Central to my study will also be the deceased body of the author (Arcan taking her own life in 2009) and its impact on the reception of her corpus. As yet there has been relatively little analysis of Ernaux's *journaux extimes*, still less of Huston's recent *Poser nue*, and little thought has been devoted to the body and sex in *Instruments des ténèbres*. Thus I hope to make some headway in filling this critical gap. By contrast many have commented on Arcan's physical appearance including, within the latest opus on her work, Kristopher Poulin-Thibault, Mélissa Thériault and Chung, and there is a

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<sup>50</sup> Gill Rye and Carrie Tarr, 'Introduction', *Nottingham French Studies*, 45.3 (2006), 1-7 (p. 3).

<sup>51</sup> Kawakami, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

mention of her jacket photographs in Pauline Henri-Thierney's study of the English translation of *Putain* and *Paradis, clef en main*.<sup>52</sup> More detail is required, however, along with attention to later editions of these works and others. As we will see, these feature vastly different illustrations and solicit very diverse audiences. The study of her newspaper chronicles presents a prime opportunity, moreover, because the written and photographic content supports many of the ideas articulated throughout Arcan's corpus, and provides an interesting angle from which to analyse the author's auto-representation.

To summarise, I will undertake an analysis of the majority of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan's works, including all genres and drawing from their earliest publications to the most recent, thereby providing a comprehensive study of their erotic writing. As a result, I hope to deliver a substantial examination of their sexual and corporeal representation, with a primary focus on feminine identity, and women's bodily and sexual experiences. In so doing, I will demonstrate, from a feminist perspective, how their works respond to theorisations of sex, sexuality and corporeality, and assess what their erotic writing accords to female readers in particular and to a contemporary feminist project. Overall, I will indicate the ways in which their literature constitutes an innovative and important blueprint for more nuanced representations of feminine identity that, despite conflicting appearances, constitute a potent force against patriarchal systems and misogynist dogma.

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<sup>52</sup> In *Nelly Arcan*: Kristopher Poulin-Thibault, 'La Femme cachée sous son sexe : L'Identité onomastique et les masques dans l'œuvre de Nelly Arcan', pp. 25-40.  
Mélissa Thériault, 'Arcan, Nietzsche et les masques : Remarques sur l'apparence, la coquetterie et le nihilisme', pp. 41-62.  
Christina Chung, 'La Femme et son corps dans l'œuvre de Nelly Arcan', pp. 169-188.  
Pauline Henry-Thierney, 'Transgressive Textualities: Translating References to Gender, Sexuality and Corporeality in Nelly Arcan's *Putain* and *Paradis, clef en main*', *Canada and Beyond*, 3.1-2 (2013), 161-179 (p. 175).



## Chapter 1

### Nuanced Alternatives to Dominant Sexual Discourses

Ernaux, Huston and Arcan are deeply critical of dominant discourses on sex and sexuality, articulated within the sex, beauty and media industries, and through cultural mediums such as literature, music and philosophy. For all three authors, such discourses operate in the interest of a masculine fantasy, encourage the degradation of or violence towards women, and fail to account for female pleasure, though they be often addressed to women. They also consider that these discourses preserve a patriarchal system, and such binaries as the Madonna-whore complex. I will begin each section of this chapter by examining one or two texts from each author and the relevant discourses which they critique, beginning with Ernaux's analysis of literature, music and philosophy in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille*, Huston's condemning of erotica and pornography in *Mosaïque de la pornographie*, and Arcan's portrayal of prostitution and pornography in *Folle*. I will then turn to one erotic text from each author which I consider to constitute a nuanced alternative to these discourses, looking to Ernaux and Marc Marie's auto-photo-text *L'Usage de la photo*, Huston's novel *Infrarouge* and Arcan's autofictional novel *A Ciel ouvert*. In particular, I will examine the ways in which their erotic writing problematises such binaries as the visual-textual, subjectivity-objectivity, agency-victimhood, and the polarised position of voyeur and observed. Ultimately, I will propose that the studied authors are interested less in rejecting hegemonic discourses and their respective tropes altogether, than in recuperating and reshaping them to provide a more inclusive and nuanced representation of female sexuality.

#### 1.1 Sexual, Textual Encounters in Ernaux's *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, *Mémoire de fille* and *L'Usage de la photo*

In *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1989), *Mémoire de fille* (2016) and *L'Usage de la photo* (2005), Ernaux examines the differences and cross-overs between multiple discourses and their relationship to sexual desire. *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* is a bildungsroman about a young woman growing up in France a decade after the Second World War. The autobiographical elements are clear from the start – the heroine being called Anne – and Ernaux uses the fictional framework to express the anxiety attached to growing up as a sexually driven young woman within a society

and era dominated by gender inequality. Sensual depictions of women and sex in magazines, novels and films disturb and perplex the key protagonist, whose sexual education and freedoms are otherwise strictly kept in check by her family and social network. The novel thus narrates the difficulty of coming to terms with one's sexuality as a woman, in a setting where female desire is overlooked or discouraged, and examines both positive and negative impacts of literary and visual portrayals of female sexuality.

Ernaux revisits many of these themes in her latest autobiography *Mémoire de fille*. Despite the time lapse between these two works and their generic difference, they display distinct similarities in terms of content and context: the first tells the story of a girl in the grip of puberty in the mid-50s, and the last that of a young woman at the acme of her sexual awakening in the late-50s. Ernaux considers that this publication proved the most demanding, since she had hoped to forget this part of her life or as she puts it, that of 'cette fille',<sup>53</sup> third person narration stressing the perceived fissure between her past and present identities. After *La Honte*, *L'Evenement et Se Perdre*, to answer Michèle Bacholle-Bošković's query,<sup>54</sup> Ernaux still has secrets to divulge. Ernaux devotes the first half to her memories of the 'colonie de S dans l'Orne' (15), and the second to those in Ernemont (98) where she worked as a teacher from the age of eighteen, and her trajectory from innocence to sexual experience constitutes the primary focus. Prior to losing her virginity Ernaux feels excluded from her peer group owing to her inexperience, yet feels instantly condemned as 'Putain' following her initial sexual encounter with a boy (63). It is for this reason amongst others that Huston promotes Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* in an interview with Pascal Bruckner, because it reflects the polarised options available to women.<sup>55</sup> Ernaux employs the motif of her lost virginity to underscore the strength of the Madonna-whore dichotomy in the society of her youth and to comment on the

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<sup>53</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille* (Paris : Gallimard, 2016), pp. 16-17. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>54</sup> She asks: 'garde-t-elle [après] d'autres faux trésors dans ses soi-disant armoires vides ?' Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, 'Confessions d'une femme pudique. Annie Ernaux', *French Forum*, 28.1 (2003), 91-109 (p. 106).

<sup>55</sup> Pascal Bruckner, 'Annie Ernaux : Mémoire de jeune fille', *La Grande librairie*, France 5, 14 April 2016.

ways in which certain media contemporary to that time – music, philosophy and literature – contributed to such split perceptions.

*L'Usage de la photo* was written seven years after *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and ten years prior to *Mémoire de fille*. Co-authored with Marc Marie during Ernaux's prolific autobiographical phase, it records Ernaux and Marie's love affair with fourteen photographs and twice as many accompanying texts (one per author). Where visual, musical and literary creations are analysed as markers of sexual development in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille* – with often troubling outcomes –, Ernaux forges her own in *L'Usage de la photo* as a means of continuing this creative exploration, and to forge a more nuanced representation of female sexuality. This photo-text was written during Ernaux's treatment for breast cancer, and the text's gendered structure and co-authorship enables a more cohesive and complex illustration of sexual relationships (though, as critics have rightly pointed out, Ernaux is definitely the dominant one of this duo).<sup>56</sup> Throughout this section, I will show how this work responds to many of the problems of sexual representation made apparent in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille*. I will begin this argument by exploring the relationship between sexual representation and lived sexual experience (how texts inform sexual encounters, and sexual encounters the textual), before examining the gaps and slippages between multiple modes of representation. To finish, I will argue that in *L'Usage de la photo* Ernaux incorporates some of the stereotypes denounced in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille*, even whilst openly contesting them.

### **In with Female Desire, Out with Slut Shaming: Which Texts Work Best?**

Anne in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* possesses a naturally high libido and piqued interest in sex. She experienced her first sexual inclinations at the age of five,<sup>57</sup> and her

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<sup>56</sup> Akane Kawakami, 'Annie Ernaux's "Proof of Life": *L'Usage de la photo*', *French Studies*, 54.4 (2010), 451-462 (p. 457).;

Andrea Oberhuber, 'Epiphanie du corps dans *L'Usage de la photo* d'Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie', *Revue-analyses*, 11.1 (2016), pp. 160-193 (pp. 181-182).;

Marzia Caporale, 'Exorcising Obscenity: Narrating Sex, Illness, and the Female Self in Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*', in *Women Taking Risks in Autobiographical Narratives*, ed. by Anna Rocca and Kenneth Reeds (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 33-44 (p. 39).

<sup>57</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (Paris : Gallimard, 1989), p. 100. All subsequent

sexual desires – deemed unusual for a woman in this novel – are something which she must come to terms with in due course (23). This propensity towards a sexual “looseness” is juxtaposed to her mother’s stoic refusal of impurity (129) which causes Anne much anxiety and guilt (132). Sexual repression of this kind is shown to be dangerous, as demonstrated through the symbolic demise of Anne’s cat towards the end of the novel:

La chatte s’est couchée un matin sur le lit de mes parents pas encore rabattu, son ventre gonflé à éclater. Elle ne se léchait plus et elle ne buvait plus.

Quand je suis revenue du lycée ma mère m’a dit aussitôt, elle est morte. (151)

The cat is on the cusp of death – swollen to the point of exploding, unable to lick and attend to itself – which serves as an apt analogy of the dangers of sexual repression in keeping with a Freudian view,<sup>58</sup> not least because of the *double entendre* created by the word ‘chatte’. This passage also designates a violent death of innocence, signified by that of a primary childhood comfort (the cat), which Anne discovers upon her return from high school. Female desire in this novel, then, offsets a restrictive representation of female sexuality. Sexual experience is shown to be an inevitable part of a young woman’s personal development, and essential to building an affiliation with a collective female identity. As Anne explains: ‘Tout ce qui arrive aux autres filles finit par vous arriver, je croyais, c’est comme les règles’ (70). In this quotation, women’s bodily processes are shown to be a basis for female solidarity. Indeed, we are later informed by Anne that: ‘Si elle voulait qu’on soit vraiment copines, Gabrielle, il fallait qu’elle fasse un effort qu’on en soit au même point toutes les deux sujet garçons, le décalage n’est pas supportable’. (71). Women’s desire is thus shown to be a natural element of their sexual experience and part of a common sisterhood, contrary to familial expectations.

This rebuttal of social convention is key to a revision of popular forms of feminine culture, particularly the media and literature. As Ernaux reveals to Pierre-Louis Fort, ‘mes impressions sexuelles les plus obsédantes me sont venues de la lecture, vers treize, quatorze ans, “de mauvais livres” comme on disait chez les “cathos”’ ; hence the enduring link between her sexual and literary fascination, and

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references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>58</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey and ed. by Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 143.

social and sexual culpability.<sup>59</sup> Ernaux is fairly positive about magazines and ‘bad books’ in *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*, because they allow Anne to experiment with her sexual identity. Anne’s natural desire is stimulated by visual and literary representations alike, though the narrative voice argues that literature proves more dangerous than television as far as a young woman’s purity is concerned (34). Whilst trying on a dress, for instance, Anne says she hopes to be as desirable as the women in the books she reads (57) and that she identifies with the bad girl condemned in her mother’s copy of *Intimité* (59). It is Albert Camus’ *L’Etranger*, moreover, which serves as the catalyst for or confirmation of Anne’s turmoil, as the narrative voice explains:

il fallait que je fasse des choses dont j’avais peur, sinon valait autant rester à la maison, dans le giron de ma famille jusqu’à la rentrée scolaire, autant mourir. Je ne savais pas vers quoi je filais, comme dans les romans feuilletons, et même dans *L’Etranger*, je me souviens, il y avait écrit, c’était comme quatre coups brefs qui frappaient sur la porte du Malheur [...]. (81)

The door in this quotation signifies an impending rite of passage, and a sign of bad things to come for Anne. It is no coincidence that in *Mémoire de fille*, Ernaux (or ‘elle’ as she refers to herself) identifies with *L’Etranger*, since she feels a stranger amongst other girls. This is because she feels impure following her loss of virginity (86). She also feels an affinity with the key protagonist in Dostoyevsky’s ‘*Sous-sol*’ since she is equally alone (94). Literature in both texts thus galvanises and reflects women’s sexual development. In addition, the influence of books on girls’ sexual identity overlaps with that of films in *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*. When the narrative voice conveys Anne’s unease after reading *L’Etranger*, for instance, her reaction is not one inspired from literature but from film: ‘je me suis déshabillée avec des gestes réfléchis, lents, comme dans les films’ (35-36.) She simulates the behavior of women in films despite her sexual curiosity being sparked by the reading of a novel. There are thus cross-overs between popular cultural platforms, all of which present themselves in this novel as representational spaces to be inhabited and remediated by

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<sup>59</sup> Pierre-Louis Fort, ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux’, *The French Review*, 76.5 (2003), 984-994 (p. 990).

women. To quote Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies'.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, popular portrayals of feminine experiences can often jar with those lived by women, in unsettling ways. Anne explains her disappointment upon losing her virginity, when the reality failed to match up to descriptions in novels and poetry (88). She also condemns inaccurate tales around sex and pregnancy bandied around in society (146-147). It is perhaps partly for this reason that Anne ponders over her past affairs with boys, wondering whether they might have been mere figments of her imagination (150). This emphasises the blurring of truth and fiction when it comes to what we are told about love and sex. The only representations which come close to her experiences, ironically, are those she finds in magazines (90).

Like these novels, poetry and snippets passed on by word of mouth, songs cited in *Mémoire de Fille* convey ideas or ideals which clash with the heroine's sexual experiences. One (unnamed) ballad goes '*L'homme propose, la femme dispose*' (63) but Ernaux, we learn, '*dispose mal*' (63) Songs speak either of love and happy-endings which remind Ernaux of her past romantic illusions as a child (74), or of sex in derogatory ways. Certain refrains contain unsavoury euphemisms ('*Cha-cha-cha des thons*' [63]; '*Salade de fruits jolie jolie jolie*' [121]), and Ernaux writes that the term *putain* was culturally popularised over the summer of 1958 (63). Crucially, moreover, songs present women as passive objects, as either wife or *putain* (63).

Conversely, in *Mémoire de Fille* Ernaux speaks of philosophy in adulatory terms in a letter from January 1959:

'C'est fou ce que la philo peut nous rendre raisonnable. À force de penser, se répéter, d'écrire qu'autrui ne doit pas nous servir de moyen mais de fin, que nous sommes rationnels et que, partant, l'inconscience et le fatalisme sont dégradants, elle m'a enlevé le goût de flirter.' (99)

The philosophy of Descartes and Kant, amongst others, devalues her previous sexual behaviour, since philosophy leaves no room for 'l'impératif de jouir plutôt que de gueuler, au sperme dans la bouche, aux putains sur les bords, aux règles qui ne

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<sup>60</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), p. 126.

viennent plus' (99). In short, the central ethos within modern continental moral philosophy is at odds with the objectification of women and with inequality *tout-court*. Philosophy is shown to be beneficial to women's attainment of a subject-position and succeeds in problematising the sexual structures portrayed in music and literature. Later, feminist philosophy – Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* – explicitly connects gender and objectification, making her aware and ashamed 'd'avoir été "objet sexuel"' (135).

There is no indication, however, that her philosophical readings granted her a way out of this object-position. Further on in this text, she describes a photograph of herself in England, writing 'C'est une fille aux apparences de pin-up que je vois.' (142) She makes every effort to fit the idealised 'pin-up' model of the time, emulating the chignon of Brigitte Bardot, posing with care before the camera (142). This reference to her fashionable figure also alludes to Ernaux's earlier-cited struggle with bulimia (102-104), and begs the question as to how natural her pool-side shape really is. In short, a sense of self as object of the gaze seems unavoidable and, importantly, not wholly unpleasurable. One of the fundamental problems with *Le Deuxième sexe* and philosophy more generally according to Ernaux, is that it enables her to recognise and regret her sexual objectification, but neither to overcome nor, indeed, accept it, resulting in a sense of guilt. Ernaux, for her part, recognises the perils of (auto)objectification, but does not deny the pleasures to be gained from it. The same goes for adventurous sexual behavior which, as we saw in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, is at once exciting and liable to be punished by social shame. Thus an alternative way of writing sex is needed to explore the complexity of female desire and provide a less condemnatory account of objectification.

To summarise, philosophy proffers on the one hand the means to assert one's subjectivity as a woman, and to transcend a corporeal and passive status associated with femininity, yet fails to account for the reality of female bodily experience. Popular culture, on the other hand, such as the magazines, Harlequin novels and pop songs which recur in Ernaux's works, represent female objectification and clichés of feminine sexual identity in a more direct and less disparaging way, proposing models of feminine identity to be embodied and manipulated by women. Yet popular cultural forms serve as uncritical vectors of a sexist ideology, whereas philosophy more obviously questions the status quo and its effect on the individual. Ernaux's accounts of 1950s adolescence thus suggest the need to recognise women's limited

lot, without reducing their narratives to those of victims. As Boehringer asserts, Ernaux refuses to represent 'la femme comme victime du patriarcat d'une part et de peindre une image exclusivement positive du sujet féminin d'autre part'.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, a way of writing about sex is needed that accepts female desire, and reduces the levels of guilt felt by sexually active women like Anne and Ernaux.

### **Sexual, Textual Stains**

Ernaux often works through memories associated with shame and guilt throughout her corpus (chapters two and four), with *Mémoire de fille* proving to be a particularly trying task given the long-repressed shame of its central episode: the loss of virginity. In her work, however, issues normally considered shameful or banal are kept and treasured, and Ernaux notoriously attempts to commit even the most trivial life-events to memory (chapter two). This is evident when Anne goes blank when faced with a school writing exercise in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*. She explains that, if left to her own devices, she would speak 'de sang, de cris' (153), and she keeps notes of her lovers in her diary to preserve her past and maintain control over it as a tangible entity (141). It is owing to this preoccupation with a textual materiality that Ernaux attributes such importance to stains and traces (especially bodily fluids), described in *L'Usage de la photo* as means of stopping time.<sup>62</sup> *L'Usage de la photo* is a key example of this process of remembrance, with photographs and writing substituting her love of stains:

Je m'aperçois que je suis fascinée par les photos comme je suis depuis l'enfance par les taches de sang, de sperme, d'urine, déposées sur les draps ou les vieux matelas jetés sur les trottoirs, les taches de vin ou de nourriture incrustées dans le bois des buffets, celles de café ou de doigts gras sur des lettres d'autrefois. Les taches les plus matérielles, organiques. Je me rends compte que j'attends la même chose de l'écriture. (99)

The act of taking photographs is in itself a very physical process, reinforced and sexualised when Ernaux compares her camera to 'un sexe masculin' (91). The next

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<sup>61</sup> Monika Boehringer, 'Paroles d'autrui, paroles de soi : *Journal du dehors* d'Annie Ernaux', *Etudes françaises*, 36.2 (2000), 131-148 (p. 146).

<sup>62</sup> Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L'Usage de la photo* (Paris : Gallimard, 2005), p. 196. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.



part of this study will focus on Ernaux's photographic and written stains, examining how they operate as material records of sexual desire, and what happens when they act in concert: as photo-textual stains.

Annie Ernaux often troubles the line between photos and the written word. She employs 'photos écrites' in *Les Années* (written descriptions of photographs), and her infamous *écriture plate* throughout her corpus is quasi-photographic in places, given its undecorous representation of reality (chapters two and four). *L'Usage de la photo* is a much more obvious photo-text in which Ernaux and Marie recount their romantic story through post-coital photographs and supporting commentaries. What interests me here are the ways in which sex and the body are depicted, and what Marzia Caporale terms a 'dialectical exchange between love (life) and death, seen and unseen, presence and absence [...]'.<sup>63</sup> In no single shot can we see Ernaux or Marie's physical bodies – ironic given the sexual tone – and Ernaux exploits this narrative to come to terms with her experience of breast cancer; a condition which places a new significance on the body's presence in the world. Key to this representation of the sexual and spectral body is the photo-textual form, which blurs the boundary between the visible and invisible, past and present, sexual and asexual, material and immaterial, reader and writer, public and private, and photographs and texts themselves. From here onwards, I will argue that this allows for a richer representation as far as sexual desire and activity are concerned (especially women's), in contrast to the novels, musical refrains and philosophical studies reviewed in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille*.

To put forward this case, I must first examine the function of the photographs and commentaries in isolation, starting with the former to comply with the titular emphasis on photography (the texts' position as commentaries to the photographs, moreover, means that they are according to Kawakami 'in a sense, subordinate to them'<sup>64</sup>). In *L'Usage de la photo*, Ernaux's perspective on photography is akin to that of Roland Barthes' in *La Chambre claire*. Firstly, both Barthes and Ernaux consider photography to possess a metaphysical quality (144), Barthes suggesting

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<sup>63</sup> Caporale, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>64</sup> Kawakami, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

that it may even be ‘la vraie métaphysique’.<sup>65</sup> Secondly, Ernaux assimilates photos to physical stains and traces of past events (99) – a means of stopping time –, and Ernaux and Marie refuse to disturb any of the objects represented (though they be carefully selected): the photos must remain true to the original, sexual act (13). In this way, the photos take on a heightened value as relatively authentic testimonies of past realities (12). This generous conceptualisation is in alignment with Barthes’ assertion that photography is able to capture that which ‘ne pourra jamais plus se répéter existentiellement’.<sup>66</sup> For him, photography’s whole reason for being (its ‘nouème’) lies in its ability to present *that which has been*, to say ‘Ça a été’ and to pinpoint the ‘réel passé’.<sup>67</sup> In acting as physical traces, photographs for Ernaux constitute a material vestige of these fixed moments in the past. Inversely, they become imbricated within later sexual experiences too. Marie and Ernaux view the photos together as a secondary erotic activity to that of sexual intercourse, even standing in its stead on one occasion (20). Ernaux explains that photos capture a moment of lustful abandon, and that the subsequent reviewing process thus constitutes a way to ‘ressentir le temps’ (12), indicating that their love-making in a now-time is on some level a question of re-experiencing previous sexual encounters. The photos thus serve as imprints of and catalysts for the materiality of sexual desire, past and present (196).

In addition to allowing a merging of time zones, the photos reflect both presence and absence or, more accurately, being and nothingness, displaying in Ernaux’s words ‘Un trou par lequel on aperçoit la lumière fixe du temps, du néant.’ (144) (reinforced, as Nora Cottille-Foley notes, by the use of analogue photography).<sup>68</sup> This is particularly well executed in *Dans le couloir* (28).

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<sup>65</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire : Note sur la photographie* (Paris : Gallimard, 1980), pp. 131-133.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124 and 176.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>68</sup> ‘La photographie argentique ne doit son existence catégorielle qu’à sa disparition’. Nora Cottille-Foley, ‘L’Usage de la photographie chez Annie Ernaux’, *French Studies*, 62.4 (2008), 442-454 (p. 452).



### 1. Dans le couloir (28)

The absence of nudity and action here necessitates that the viewer turn to their private imaginary or memory bank to fill in what is missing. This photo is therefore more reflective of lived sexual experience than the supporting commentaries, precisely because the focus on the objects here reflects less than a written representation, and thus serves as a template upon which the reader can transcribe their sexual experiences. This substantiates Barthes' claim that looking at photographs is both a personal and social experience. On the one hand, one views them as a means of understanding a social phenomenon, and with a general awareness of their subject-foci, of their social implications and so forth, with no notable personal involvement. This is called the *studium*.<sup>69</sup> In some cases, an instant attachment to a photo is formed, which Barthes calls the *punctum*.<sup>70</sup> Barthes explains that contemplating a photo can be both a personal and social experience, depending on whether the *punctum* is enabled. In this case, it is triggered by the memories or images which the viewer associates with the given symbols. The discarded clothes are not significant in themselves but as signifiers of sexual intercourse, a wider cipher with which the viewer can engage on a personal level, thereby allowing the *punctum* to be activated. Absence as motif in Marie and Ernaux's photographs thus allows for the extradiegetic inclusion of the viewer's experiences within the text, and

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<sup>69</sup> Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

invites interpretation. The ‘holes’ in these images lead Jordan and Cottille-Foley to assimilate them with crime scenes,<sup>71</sup> and we as readers are called upon to act as investigators. In both cases, absence enables a bridging between authorial and collective consciousness, a reminder of Ernaux’s surrealist studies at master’s level and of the phototext *Nadja* by André Breton which she cites as an influence,<sup>72</sup> and whose narrative content is largely inspired by Nadja’s departure.

That being said, this oscillation between the *studium* and *punctum*, and the reader’s detectival readings, are intimately informed by the accompanying commentaries. These serve to indicate Ernaux and Marie’s personal associations with the images, which are often at odds with the preconceptions the viewer might form from them. The interplay between images and words allows for interesting insights into our preconceptions about sexual identity. This is particularly clear from Marie’s response to *La Chaussure dans le séjour*.



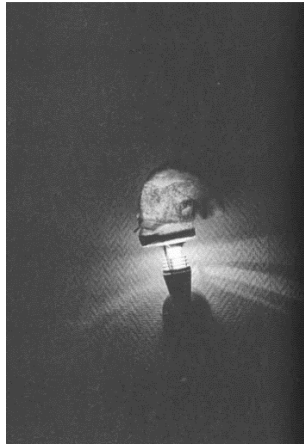
## 2. La Chaussure dans le séjour (58)

Marie explains at length the woe associated with these boots, which he wore to assume a more masculine persona. Unfortunately, the time it took him to undo the laces led to a temporary loss of erection, and thus had the opposite effect (66-67). Whilst the boot’s positioning above the bra alludes to female submission and male dominance then, the reality is quite the reverse.

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<sup>71</sup> Shirley Jordan, ‘Interfaces: Verbal/Visual Experiment in New Women’s Writing in French’, in *Women’s Writing in Twenty-First Century France: Life as Literature*, pp. 196-211 (p. 200), and Cottille-Foley, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

<sup>72</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Ecrire la vie* (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), p. 533.



### 3. Bruxelles, hôtel des écrins, chambre 125 (154)

This is also clear in *Bruxelles, Hôtel des Écrins, chambre 125*, featuring a sock on top of a lightbulb, and followed by this contextualisation: ‘M. est souvent parti, à Karlsruhe, à Montpellier, en Mauritanie. Je l’ai soupçonné d’avoir une autre femme. Mais le peu de choses que nous avons à enlever à cause de la chaleur torride est peut-être seulement la raison de cette absence de photos.’ (156) In short, the lapse in the authors’ picture-taking and, I would add, the minimalist and asexual nature of this photo, are simply owing to a lack of clothes worn during a warm season, and not to Marie’s trips abroad delineated within the commentary. The commentary thus provides a valid and invalid account of affairs, and the photo itself very little. As Marie asserts, whilst there are no signs of the real event for the viewer to see, aside from a given moment in the photograph, the photographs signify for the photographer ‘ce qui s’est passé avant, pendant, et juste après.’ (128) The breach between our preconceptions derived from the photograph and the ensuing written explanation throws into question the authenticity of both mediums alike: which is the truer of the two? And which medium, photograph or text, or which interpretation, Ernaux’s or the reader’s, determines the photo-text? Ultimately, both must be taken into account, making for definitively fluid meanings.

#### **Role Reversals**

There is also a slippage between multiple forms of representation and their erotic function, with erotic symbols used in non-sexual contexts, and vice versa. This is evident when Marie refers to a white bedsheet hanging out of Ernaux’s window, which is used by her to protest the invasion of Iraq (78), or in the case of the boot and bra in the aforementioned image (58). The bra serves as a metonym of breast-

cancer and a boot as that of military intervention: erotic symbols turned sociopolitical. The boot is also a recurring image which ties into multiple themes, including penile erection and masculinity, as discussed, and illicit liaisons, since the boots and laces correlate with the phrase ‘mélanger les souliers’ which Ernaux reads in a newspaper, as a euphemism for having an affair (61-62).

Ironically, then, an image can incorporate a play on words, and adopt an allegorical character. Writing, conversely, often reveals a photographic quality owing to emphatic description, as is clear in this quotation: ‘Au premier plan, à droite, un pull rouge – ou une chemise – et un débardeur noir [...] Sur le débardeur, très visible, une étiquette blanche. Plus loin, un jean bleu recroquevillé, avec sa ceinture noire’ (29). The precision of the imagery aims to produce a carefully orchestrated scene within the reader’s mind; to recreate the sexual set *as it had been*, in keeping with Barthes’ theorisation of photography. Ironically, however, this passage depicts not the *moment* as it had been, but the *photograph itself as it had been*; it is a pseudo-photographic description of a photograph, an example of what Bacholle-Boškovič terms ‘photos en prose’ in her analysis of Ernaux’s *Les Années*, whereby a photograph is not shown but connoted.<sup>73</sup> This metatextual description of a photograph thereby allows for a distancing from the ‘réel passé’ to another degree (more so than a traditional moment of *ekphrasis* might permit).

The forms of representation in this work are similarly difficult to categorise in terms of traditional types of sexual literature. None of the photographs, for instance, reveals the body or sexual intercourse (144), signifying for Ernaux ‘la disparition de mon corps que je vois’ (146). All of this is left to the reader’s imagination, or occasionally referenced within the written text. In this way, writing is closer to pornography in that it draws attention to the material elements of sexual intercourse, which most theorists of pornography agree to be one of its defining features,<sup>74</sup> whilst the visual representations are arguably erotic since the event of sexual intercourse and its physicality are never openly disclosed. One has only to

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<sup>73</sup> Michèle Bacholle-Boškovič, *Annie Ernaux : De la perte au corps glorieux* (Rennes : PU Rennes, 2011), p. 90.

<sup>74</sup> Julie Lavigne, *La Traversée de la pornographie : Politique et érotisme dans l’art féministe* (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2014), p. 75.  
Robert Goldeson and Kenneth Anderson, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Sex* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 194.

think of Barthes's analogy in *Le Plaisir du texte* of the 'vêtement qui baille' in erotic representation; the sexual object is always veiled with layers of artifice.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Ernaux explains that photographing the post-coital scene is arguably more obscene a choice for a photography project in our contemporary epoch than one which privileges explicit content, writing: 'En un sens, il était moins obscène pour moi – ou plus admissible actuellement – de photographier le sexe de M' (32). In an era where the male member constitutes a commonplace feature of the popular imaginary – a trope demonstrably *on/scene*, to use Linda Williams' astute distinction between the *ob/scene* and *on/scene* – the less explicit work proves more shocking.<sup>76</sup> From this perspective, Ernaux's erotic photographs are more obscene than mainstream pornography for the millennial palate. Ernaux thus plays with our expectations in terms of the pornographic, erotic and obscene, through her unorthodox use of the photographic and written form.

The same can be said of the erotic imagery, as in the photograph below:



#### **4. Chambre, matin de Noël, suite (177)**

The bra and suspenders are self-confessed banal symbols, a conventional outfit taken straight out of what Ernaux terms the 'théâtre érotique intime' (178). She betrays a certain embarrassment about these undergarments when she says she could not wear them when driving, lest she be forced to reveal them in the event of an accident, and confesses that 'je ne [les] mets jamais pour écrire, comme si elle [cette tenue] m'en empêchait' (178). This implies a schism between her writing and sexual worlds, her role as writer and sexual actor: her written texts are inspired by her erotic experiences, but the writing process is purposely desexualised.

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<sup>75</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris : Seuil, 1973), p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> Linda Williams, 'Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction', in *Porn Studies*, ed. by Linda Williams (London: Duke UP, 2004), pp. 1-23 (pp. 4-5).

Her embarrassment might stem from the overt performativity involved in wearing lingerie of this kind, juxtaposed to her writing self which is so bent on authenticity (chapter four). This is substantiated when she refers to outfits like these as disguises, thinking back to her fourteen-year-old self watching *Légion étrangère* ‘avec des putains en guêpière et bas noirs’ when ‘je m’étais costumée tant bien que mal avec mon maillot de bain et des bouts de tissu en l’une d’entre elles’ (178).<sup>77</sup> Just as we saw to be the case in *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*, the young Annie’s sexual performance is greatly inspired by the films she watches. In *L’Usage de la photo*, however, Ernaux is no longer controlled by images of other women, but actively takes charge of the images (re)produced. The camera changes hands, with Ernaux referring to her camera as a male member (123), indicating the extent to which gender roles have shifted away from those privileged in erotic cinema. Here, Ernaux is subject and agent of the footage, and the erotic garments are not used to sexualise a female figure but to permit a subtle critique of unfair gender structures (this is paralleled by Rena’s dominant use of her infrared camera in Huston’s *Infrarouge*, as we will see). In addition, Marie claims that he and Ernaux are, through and throughout this process, ‘sur un pied d’égalité’ (128), counter to the media’s normalisation of gender inequality in *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille*. Unlike the philosophy and pop music Ernaux references in *Mémoire de Fille*, moreover, there does not appear to be any derisive judgement involved in referencing women’s chosen and carefully crafted position as objects in the ‘théâtre érotique’, only the indication that another script exists.

### **Sublimating the Object**

Building on this theme of social (im)propriety, it is interesting to note how Ernaux addresses her experience of breast cancer and chemotherapy as something which must be socially and personally averted, and how this photo-diary project enables her to unveil aspects of her cancerous body which she is reluctant to do in real life.<sup>78</sup> Firstly, she deflects her fear of dying through her affair with Marie, which makes her “‘vivre *au-dessus* du cancer” (87) and offers welcome distraction by way of more

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<sup>77</sup> What ‘elles’ is referring to is not expressly cited, though I assume she means the cups.

<sup>78</sup> Karin Schwerdtner, ‘Désir et relation : *L’Usage de la photo*’, in *Mythes et érotismes dans les littératures et les cultures francophones de l’extrême contemporain*, ed. by Efstratia Oktapoda (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2013), pp. 97-112 (p. 105).



manageable anxieties such as Marie's continuing affection for his ex (88). Secondly, she limits the number of people she tells to avoid becoming an object of pity and compassion; of becoming someone else in her friends' eyes (75-76). Thirdly, objects pertaining to her cancer treatment are noticeably lacking from her photographs. The only references provided are written descriptions. Ernaux writes about her tumour (24), balding, wig (21-22, and 195), catheter (194-195) and mammograms (194) which she observes with caution and displeasure, fearing 'ce qu'on allait [potentiellement] trouver *de plus*.' (194) Medical photographs thus testify to a present and future reality as well as a past one, in keeping with Edwards' summary of Barthesian theory: 'The photograph [...] refers to what has been, to what will be and to what will have been.'<sup>79</sup>

Parallels can also be drawn between these x-rays and Marie and Ernaux's pictures. In the former, where the photographer becomes the photographed, Ernaux's body is finally exposed, and she has no control over her treatment either figuratively or literally (in terms of removing the tumour). In the latter, however, the body is noticeably absent, Ernaux has agency as the person taking and captioning the photographs, and the clothes are presumably removed with gusto. Where the body is present, it signifies death, and where the body is nowhere to be seen there is evidence of life. On the other hand, Shirley Jordan has noted that 'each image [...] rekindles the philosophical problem of what the world looks like when we are no longer in it, and permits Ernaux to rehearse for death by flirting proleptically with the idea that she and Marie are already phantoms'.<sup>80</sup> In serving as testaments to life *as it had been*, but is no longer, photographs foreshadow what death might look like. The body, present or not, is thus closely affiliated with cancer and death. It is no coincidence that this tension between life and death should have a post-coital staging, since sex, life and death are firmly intertwined in French literature and language (we have only to think unto Georges Bataille's corpus and the orgasm's denotation as *une petite mort*) and, beyond that, Western philosophy and

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<sup>79</sup> Natalie Edwards, 'Annie Ernaux's Phototextual Archives: Ecrire la vie', in *Framing French Culture*, ed. by Natalie Edwards, Ben McCann and Peter Poiana (Adelaide: UP Adelaide, 2015), pp. 177-191 (p. 180).

<sup>80</sup> Shirley Jordan, 'Improper Exposure: "L'Usage de la photo" by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 7.2 (2007), 123-141 (p. 136).

psychoanalysis, with Eros and Thanatos featuring heavily in Freudian theorisation of libidinal drives.<sup>81</sup>

It is unsurprising then that breast cancer is conceptualised as an abject topic, as shown when Ernaux draws a correlation between informing Marie she has cancer, and telling a boy in her past about her abortion (21-22) (a reading of Ernaux's *L'Évènement* emphasises how far women seeking an abortion are socially abjected in 1950s France [chapter two]). In the same way that Ernaux fears telling signs in x-rays, I would argue that she is unable to include photographs pertaining to cancer in *L'Usage de la photo* for fear of coming too close to this abject memory. This is diametrically opposed to Jo Spence's famous collections *Cancer Shock* and *The Picture of Health?*,<sup>82</sup> which Alison Fell claims to be emblematic of a turn in breast cancer narratives from the 60s onwards, led by women seeking alternatives to paternalist medical discourse.<sup>83</sup> Where Spence utilises photographs as a coping mechanism to imagine a time when she was not or will not be ill, and employs photographs to regain agency in the face of disease, photographs for Ernaux it seems, threaten to do the opposite: to cement the abject reality of her time as a cancer patient and to prevent her from coming to terms with it. Whilst patterns in contemporary artwork about breast cancer point to a heroic tale of empowerment, Ernaux's is a little more problematic.

I would argue that it is precisely because of photography's ability to display what Barthes calls the '*Ça a été*' that Ernaux chooses not to figure breast cancer in her photographs, to avoid a memory that is too close to reality for comfort. Writing,

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<sup>81</sup> See, in particular, Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme* (Paris : Minuit, 2014).

For Freud, libidinal drives towards pleasure belong to the category of Eros, under which all life instincts fall. See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: And Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2003).

Several critics have already referred to Eros and Thanatos in relation to this text: Oberhuber, *op. cit.*, p. 169.;

Barbara Havercroft, 'L'Autre "scène" : L'Écriture du cancer dans *L'Usage de la photo* d'Annie Ernaux et Marc Marie', in *Annie Ernaux : Perspectives Critiques* (Ottawa : Legas, 2009), pp. 127-137 (pp. 127-137), as cited in Oberhuber, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 199. Jordan asserts that *L'Usage de la photo* is an example of 'autothanatography'. *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Jo Spence, *The Picture of Health?*, 1982-1986, photography series., and Jo Spence, *Cancer Shock*, 1982, photonovel.

<sup>83</sup> Alison Fell, 'Intimations of Mortality: Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo* as Breast Cancer Narrative', *Nottingham French Studies*, 48.2 (2009), 68-79 (pp. 70-71).

on the other hand, allows critical distance, so that the past may be tackled without traumatic contact with the moment *as it had been*. In short, writing allows the abject to be circumnavigated and sublimated, in a way that is impossible for Ernaux through photography. As was the case with *Dans le couloir* and *Chambre 223*, moreover, the absence of Ernaux's body from the photographic frame invites the reader to turn to their own host of memories to fill in the gaps, thereby depersonalising the narrative and enabling the reader to relate to it on their own terms and with potentially therapeutic results.

Ernaux explains in the closing pages that she took a collective shot of hers and Marie's photographs, in an attempt to convey 'une totalité. Celle de notre histoire.' (195). The final piece falls short of expectations, and she states that in the end, these may mean nothing to anybody, signifying only 'la mode des chaussures au début des années 2000.' (196) On a corresponding basis, I would argue that the medical photographs are alluded to as inadequate records of Ernaux's cancerous journey, and that writing enables her to articulate it more fully. As such, writing acts simultaneously as a means of evading the memory of cancer as it had been, and of reconstructing it in an alternative and more encompassing manner. In short, reproducing a past reality as it had been is not always synonymous with an authentic portrayal of the past, and writing potentially serves as a more revealing window to times gone by. Then again, Ernaux states that their photos act as a base for these written reflections: 'Comme si l'écriture des photos autorisait celle du cancer.' (76) Photos and commentaries are not so much functionally opposed in this work as fused, with Ernaux describing this *œuvre* as a collection of 'photos écrites' (17). The result in terms of sexuality and corporeality is a magic trick of sorts, with 'des pages qui font disparaître et réapparaître le corps' as Andrea Oberhuber phrases it.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

One can conclude that Ernaux accepts and rejects stereotypes of female sex and sexuality privileged in dominant sexual discourses in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, *Mémoire de fille* and *L'Usage de la photo*. In the former two works, Ernaux privileges popular forms of feminine culture such as magazines and lowbrow novels, despite their sexist undertones, for their capacity to help women make sense of their

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<sup>84</sup> Oberhuber, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

feminine identity and experiment with erotic style and performance. Ernaux paradoxically celebrates philosophy as means for women to transcend their corporeal and passive feminine condition (heavily endorsed by the pop music of her youth), but suggests that many philosophers have failed to recognise the pleasurable potential of objectification too, and thus contributed to women's sense of sexual shame. In *L'Usage de la photo*, Ernaux produces a more nuanced representation of sex and sexuality, not least thanks to the text's co-autobiographical and semi-photographic form. She complicates the boundary between visual and textual representation, even whilst preserving and taking advantage of the uses proper to each. Photographs, for instance, serve as material traces of the authors' lived sexual experiences and trigger the viewers' memories too, whilst the written representations allow for antagonistic perspectives to emerge and for a heightened reflection upon the preceding photographs. I also explored how photographs can be quasi-textual, and writing quasi-photographic (complicated all the more by the case of 'photos en prose'), and how Ernaux subverts the traditional function of photographs and written texts alike to challenge what we understand by the pornographic, erotic and obscene. Finally, I argued that Ernaux and Marie's photographic project, albeit devoid of cancer-centric images, acted as a catalyst for Ernaux's narrative on breast cancer, and that her commentaries helped her to sublimate its abject memory. In the end, it appears that photographs, commentaries and their respective readings work together to form a more nuanced representation of sex and the body, and a more comprehensive telling of human experience that broaches death as well as life. Where the novel and autobiography present a problem, the photo-text presents itself as a possible solution. It showcases a woman as object, subject and agent of sexual representation, and challenges myths about female desire circulated through literary, cinematic, musical and philosophical discourses. In the next section I will explore how Huston attacks pornography specifically in a theoretical text, and how a novel of hers offers creative alternatives for and by women.

## **1.2 'Good Sex, Bad Sex' in Huston's *Mosaïque de la pornographie* and *Infrarouge***

In her critical essay *Mosaïque de la pornographie* (1982), what Huston means by *pornographie* is inclusive of erotica, pornography and other modes of sexual representation, as well as prostitution given pornography's etymological roots ('il

vient du grec *porné*, “putain”, et *graphein*, “écriture”).<sup>85</sup> For her, there is little difference in principle or value-systems between these ‘pornographic’ elements as far as women’s condition is concerned. I will start by exploring Huston’s condemnation of pornography in this broader sense, following the structure of this critical essay: starting with Huston’s introductory criticisms of existing pornography, erotica and prostitution, moving to an overview of key erotic works from the last four centuries, and finishing with a call for a new and improved type of sexual representation. I will then argue that *Infrarouge* (2010) is an answer of sorts to this proposal, providing a feminist form of pornography. For the sake of simplifying my comparison, I will not differentiate between erotica, pornography and sexual representation to too great an extent in this section, but abide by Huston’s conglomerate definition of pornography.

### *Mosaïque de la pornographie*

In *Mosaïque de la pornographie*, Huston analyses multiple aspects of the pornographic landscape: mainstream pornography, writings about or by prostitutes (Huston terms the latter ‘pornégraphie’ in her introduction to Arcan’s *Burqa de chair* [chapter two]), and erotica from the eighteenth century to the present (15).<sup>86</sup> Huston upholds that these three strands of sexual representation propagate the same limiting images of women and female pleasure (aside from a certain Marie-Thérèse’s works, to be discussed), asserting that all pornographic literature ‘fait violence à toutes les femmes’ (26) and in part by implying that women enjoy their own sexual subordination (130). This is not to say that Huston advocates censorship (22). What interests her instead is as follows:

comment se fait-il que, dans une société où les rapports entre les sexes sont plus égalitaires et plus libres que jamais auparavant, nous avons toujours, et même de plus en plus, envie et besoin de nous gaver de représentations de contrainte, de domination et de destructions sexuelles ? (22).

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<sup>85</sup> Nancy Huston, *Mosaïque de la pornographie* (Paris : Payot et Rivage, 2004), p. 32. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>86</sup> Nancy Huston, ‘Arcan, Philosophe’, in Nelly Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, with intro. by Nancy Huston (Paris : Seuil, 2011), pp. 9-32 (p. 11). This introduction was later republished as a stand-alone piece in: Nancy Huston, *Carnets de l’incarnation* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2016).

These constitute the fundamental functions of this critical text: to outline her reservations regarding pornography old and new; to provide evidence of an affinity between erotic and pornographic texts; to highlight issues for female identity within these (that are getting worse not better); and to propose a reform of the pornographic genre to resist androcentric paradigms.

### **A Man's Business: A Damning Account of 'Le Théâtre p & p' and its Investors**

The most extensive and exhaustive section is Huston's critique of past erotic literature, covering the works of Pauline Réage, Anaïs Nin, John Cleland, Daniel Defoe, the Marquis de Sade and Marie-Thérèse, a working prostitute. Marie-Thérèse is the only author who escapes Huston's scathing condemnation on the basis that her works incorporate the lives of real women, lesbians, mothers and prostitutes (123). As for the others, Huston tars them all with the same derisive brush, affirming that the underlying moral of these works can be summarised as 'les hommes accouchent des femmes, et l'accouchement est toujours violent (pour les femmes).' (81) For Huston, erotica and pornography alike consist in men telling stories about sex in which women end up as victims of male violence. This is not to say that women are always on the receiving end of these unfair transactions. Female authors, like Réage and Nin, often simply reproduce a male perspective, since when a woman becomes author, 'Il se passe quelque chose : un glissement grammatical.' (82) Huston refers to an exhibit at the Pompidou centre entitled '*Féminin-Masculin : le sexe de l'art*' (15), in which she found herself unable to distinguish between men and women's works. She claims that none of them spoke of love and women tried to prove themselves as 'douées' as men by objectifying the body (Huston does not distinguish between female and male bodies here) and privileging sexual perversions and cruelty (16). The fact that Huston stresses a similarity between men and women's work implies that there should be a difference (chapter two), and intimates that female pornographers have a responsibility to emancipate and protect women via their cultural practice. Pornography produced by women does not automatically equate to feminist pornography.

Huston similarly refuses to make exceptions for violent or derogatory representations of women in any porno-literary work on the grounds of higher aesthetic quality (chapter four), opining that 'quelles que soient les variantes qui résultent de leurs prétentions littéraires, un fait lexical demeure constant dans tous

ces livres : c'est la pauvreté du vocabulaire de la jouissance féminine.' (84-85) Huston's judgement of pornography is thus based not on aesthetic valuations, but on how effectively it reflects feminine pleasure and *jouissance*. Put another way, Huston terms this a difference between her intellectual and feminine selves:

Il y a depuis longtemps deux voix qui parlent en moi, la féminine et l'intellectuelle, et il est assez rare qu'elles parlent à l'unisson. Un grincement peut se produire à tout instant, au gré de la moindre lecture, du moindre contact avec les images et les récits de la lecture qui m'entoure. (26)

Huston is therefore unable to reconcile her intellectual and emotive responses to pornography. Ultimately, it is the latter which win out in this essay, with Huston unwilling to overlook a narrow and oppressive portrayal of women on aesthetic grounds alone.

It is on this basis that she argues against pro-pornography and pro-prostitution arguments relating to equality and freedom. In 'Arcan, Philosophe', she refers to pornography and prostitution not as separate entities, but under the umbrella term "théâtre p & p".<sup>87</sup> In *Mosaïque de la pornographie*, she refers to both terms individually to highlight not their differences but their uniformity. To begin with, she claims to be confused by the fact that, despite growing sexual freedoms in our day and age, she is yet to find or hear a female prostitute or porn star who enjoyed her job and 's'y sent libre' (14). For Huston, the limits on porn stars' and prostitutes' freedom give us sufficient cause to undermine freedom of speech and "liberté sexuelle" so privileged in our contemporary epoch (14). The inverted commas here speak louder than words, inferring that sexual freedom is not universally accessible.

As she put it in an article for *Le Monde* last year, 'La seule chose libre là-dedans, c'est le marché'<sup>88</sup> (chapter two). Whilst official discourses condemn pornography as immoral and opposed to the values underpinning liberal democracies, in fact (Huston claims) the ubiquity of pornography supports existing social structures (215). This concept is reiterated by Huston in *Reflets dans un œil d'homme* when she declares the revenue from pornography to be higher than that of Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Ebay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix and Earthlink combined

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>88</sup> Nancy Huston, 'Le Marché a démocratisé le droit de cuissage', *Le Monde*, 30 October 2017.

(chapter four).<sup>89</sup> This is also in keeping with the views of Kelly Dennis, who goes so far as to argue that as a result of capitalist schemata, ‘sex is less a pleasurable activity than a sales technique and market goal.’<sup>90</sup> Male domination of the economy logically results in men benefitting financially from pornography and prostitution. These sex industries thus benefit both a male libidinal and financial economy, the main problem being that this necessitates women’s ‘*non-désir*’ (2016). In short, the sex industry does not by any means run counter to the institutional values and structures of our epoch, but contributes on a very intimate level to its progress and, by extension, to the preservation of male desire and the accumulation of men’s wealth. In each case women’s sexual freedom is compromised. This reinforces Huston’s view that pornography as a whole is damaging to women not men (14). Huston also asserts that men are complicit in this gendered rift as authors of erotic literature, writing ‘D’un côté, la prostituée [woman], de l’autre l’écrivain [man]’, and argues that most libertine texts would be read by men, who would identify not with the victim (usually women), but with the author (usually men) (31-32). Men are therefore complicit in women’s victimhood in erotic literature as author or reader, as perpetrator or spectator, and women inevitably lose out.

### **Madonna-Whores**

Women’s disempowerment through pornographic narratives lies not simply in the negative representation of women, but the way its limited, male-centred view of sexual relations comes to be identified with sex as lived experience; as ‘la vérité tout court’ (272). What interests Huston is:

de comprendre l’interaction entre les récits et le réel : comment les ‘effets du réel’ dans le récit correspondent aux ‘effets de récit’ dans le réel. [...] Je cherche donc à explorer [...] ma propre schizophrénie et celle du monde qui est le mien.  
(44)

Women suffer from the ‘schizophrenia’ of trying to reconcile dominant representations of sexuality with their own felt desires. Conversely, Huston contends that oppressive ideologies at the heart of pornography are reflective of a wider

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<sup>89</sup> Nancy Huston, *Reflets dans un œil d’homme* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2012), p. 193.

<sup>90</sup> Kelly Dennis, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching* (New York: Berg, 2009), p. 158.



phenomenon of sexual violence and inequality. As examples, Huston mentions the fact that 15,000 women are raped annually in France, and that 30,000 prostitute themselves (44-45).<sup>91</sup> There is thus a vicious circle at work: porn encourages violence, and in turn becomes the reality that it feeds and reflects.

According to Huston, all women are intimately affected by this industry. Women, she argues, are unable to forget their bodies, since they are constantly positioned as hyper-visible objects of the gaze and male desire. She herself, she admits, is reminded of her body ‘à chaque instant, dans la rue, dans les cafés, les squares et mêmes les bibliothèques.’ (13) Women are objectified far more than men:

Quant un sujet est traité comme un objet, l’effet le plus extrême est qu’il commence à se considérer lui-même comme un objet. Les hommes font l’expérience de cette schizophrénie dans des situations comme la guerre, mais les femmes – et surtout les prostituées – en courent le risque tous les jours. (92)

The analogy with war hyperbolises the gravity of women’s peril in everyday society. Where men are objectified in extreme contexts, women’s objectification, which may prove equally detrimental to their identity, is considered banal. Pornography leads to an aptitude for what Huston terms ‘scission’ in women (92): having to conceive of themselves as either object or subject.

Huston refuses to opt for monolithic or dual labels of this kind; a refusal described as:

mon refus d’accepter pour ma norme la dichotomie femme/intellectuel ; d’ignorer que je me retrouve simultanément à la place du sujet et à celle de l’objet ; et, en l’occurrence, de considérer le plaisir du sujet comme n’ayant rien à voir avec la douleur de l’objet [...] (42).

Huston believes that such binary readings of female identity lead to dangerous masochistic behaviour on the part of women or, on the reverse side of the coin, sexual repression:

Cette aptitude au clivage est à l’origine, à mon avis, de bien des comportements féminins dits masochistes. C’est elle qui permet non seulement à des millions de femmes de louer leur corps (de feindre la jouissance) mais à des millions d’autres d’être frigides (de se la refuser). (258-259)

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<sup>91</sup> No dates or source provided for these figures.

In other words, to retain their position as object and whore, women may relinquish their agency in sex altogether. If, however, they opt to maintain their position as subject and Madonna, women may refuse sex completely, as a dangerous foray into the “whore” position. In both cases identity formation is based on unrealistic and circumscribed absolutes. Huston thus criticises pornography and prostitution for presenting female identity as polarised, as offering women only two options neither of which represents their own pleasure or agency.

Huston is particularly critical of the Madonna-whore complex when it comes to common misconceptions of motherhood, asserting in ‘Le Féminisme comme éthique’ that the binary view of female identity produces a distorting separation of maternity from sexuality: ‘cela veut dire qu’Eve et Marie, c’est la même bonne femme, perçue par l’homme tantôt comme amante et tantôt comme mère.’<sup>92</sup> Huston consciously reinforces the connection between Eve and Mary, lovers and mothers, throughout *Mosaïque de la pornographie*, mournful of the fact that pornography forever fails to mention ‘origine’ (239). It is worth noting that the Greek equivalent for origins – *arché* – signifies power. The lack of references to pregnancy or childbirth in pornographic discourse certainly *disempowers* women, by failing to represent them as potentially “whores” *and* mothers. Huston explains that prostitutes are rarely represented as mothers, whilst the reality is quite the reverse (250-251). In fact, Huston informs us that many prostitutes start prostituting themselves to feed their children, and provides the example of a prostitutes’ protest in a church in 1975 in France where prostitutes campaigned for the right to keep their children (250-251). Her conclusion on these points is categorical: ‘Les putains accouchent et les mères baisent, voilà ce qui se passe pour de vrai.’ (20)

In her closing comments, she states that pornography will forever prove detrimental to women if the Madonna-whore divide remains in place (269-271), veering back to the point made at the very beginning of this text. In her introduction, Huston claims that while it would be beneficial for women to present a female perspective on sex and sexuality via pornography, pornography (be it male or female

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<sup>92</sup> Nancy Huston, ‘Le Féminisme comme éthique’, *Le Genre humain*, 14.1 (1986), 161-174 (p. 165).

authored) will remain misogynist so long as women are presented in binary ways.<sup>93</sup> As she puts it, ‘L’essentiel, l’éternel, le sempiternel, l’éminemment agaçant à mon sens, c’est la scission radicale des deux images du féminin : la maman et la putain.’ (15) The Madonna-whore complex thus clearly constitutes the *fil conducteur* of her critique of pornography in *Mosaïque de la pornographie*. Despite her rather cynical outlook on women’s voices in pornography, moreover, to overturn the Madonna-whore complex can at least bring us a step closer to a more empowering model of pornography for women.

Though some feminist initiatives have already taken place in this field, she argues, they have been tentative and rare. In her mind, few women have had the courage to admit that pornography does not represent their views and sexual preferences, and to outwardly acknowledge that it is produced by men about men (259). I take this as an invitation to women to make their voices heard, take charge of erotic narratives and produce pornography that accounts for women’s sexual penchants instead. If, as Huston believes, ‘la censure n’est en aucun cas une panacée [au sexisme]’, then producing rather than censoring pornography may constitute women’s best weapon against sexism.<sup>94</sup> This is what Huston attempts in her novel *Infrarouge*.

### ***Infrarouge***

The action of *Infrarouge* is set in Florence, where Rena Greenblatt holidays with her father and stepmother, leaving her partner Aziz and working commitments behind in Paris. Though there for tourism, the characters’ personal histories and anxieties obstruct their immediate experience of Italy. The narrative culminates in the death of Rena’s father, in her separation from Aziz and loss of employment, and in an unexpected truce of solidarity between Rena and her stepmother; an ironic inversion of the traditional happy family holiday. Several subtexts coalesce with the primary storyline, such as the preoccupation with aesthetic forms – demonstrated through the references to Florentine artworks and the motif of Rena’s infrared camera (hence the title) – and the interest in transnationality and multi-cultural heritage. Most important

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<sup>93</sup> Bruno Boutet, ‘Défense et illustration de la porno’, *Le Temps fou*, 1980, p. 198, as cited in Huston, *Mosaïque*, p. 269

<sup>94</sup> Huston, ‘Le Féminisme comme éthique’, p. 171.

for this argument is the sexually charged narrative strand forged from Rena's stream of consciousness. This narrative is compounded of multiple pornographic and erotic scenes that 'are always inseparable from story' according to Diana Holmes,<sup>95</sup> and that are both sexually loaded and at times surprisingly lacking in explicit content.

Both the explicit and comparatively 'tame' content is subversive. At the novel's opening where Rena kisses Aziz goodbye at the airport, she bears a trace of his dry sperm at the base of her neck from their earlier lovemaking (16), wearing it like perfume. The novel also includes sado-masochistic scenes involving Rena and her father's colleague (119-120), consenting sexual tussles with numerous van or lorry drivers during Rena's hitch-hiking days (148), and a sexual encounter between Rena and a Jewish cantor during her menses (unbeknownst to him) (187-188). Further, Rena marries a homosexual Cambodian man so that he can be granted French citizenship, and lives with him for a year without ever consummating their marriage (76). What adds to this subversion is the way in which these stories are told. One scene was awarded the far from desirable Literary Review's Bad Sex in Fiction Award in 2012, inferring its deficient stylistic quality. Ironically, this prize cannot be awarded to expressly pornographic literature, since it was created to discourage bad sex scenes in otherwise 'good' novels,<sup>96</sup> and the case for defining this novel as pornographic thus resists a conventional reading. I will also argue that this 'bad sex' scene adds to rather than detracts from the aesthetic and cognitive value of the text, contrary to what this prize implies. As for the other sex scenes in this novel, I will establish the following: that Huston's pornographic style denounces the ethical loopholes within porn-production, subverts its representational tropes (namely the Madonna-whore complex), promotes pluralised portraits of the body, humanises men and women, privileges a female over a male gaze, female genitalia over men's, and encourages other women to write about sex in this way.

### **Unlikely Sexual Stars**

I would like to begin, ironically, at the end of the novel where Rena describes an interview held with a porn-producer named Gérard, whose speciality consisted in

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<sup>95</sup> [Forthcoming] Diana Holmes, 'Bad Sex/Good Sex. Nancy Huston and the Boundaries of Erotic Writing', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 2019 [pp. currently unavailable].

<sup>96</sup> Jonathan Beckman, 'Helpless Dollops of Custard', *Literary Review*, 405 (2012) <<https://literaryreview.co.uk/bad-sex-in-fiction-award>> [accessed 5 March 2016]

filming women's temporary resistance to sex or to being filmed during shoots. Gérard would continue filming and disregarded claims of rape on the premise that the girls were contractually consigned to be filmed during the act of violation. Inversely, this was the only man whom Rena was unable to photograph because, we are told, she had to love men before she could do so (264). The omniscient narrative voice thus advocates both emotional and consensual engagement within pornographic production, in keeping with Patricia Marino's view that sexual objectification can take on a positive and healthy dimension provided 'ongoing consent' is in place.<sup>97</sup> The answer to pornography and objectification is not to do away with it altogether then, but to ensure ethical practice. Rena achieves this in her photography project through which she presents prostitutes alongside photographs of their children (110). This representation is pornographic by definition (in light of its aforementioned etymological roots), yet humanises the prostitutes where Gérard dehumanised them and defies what Huston terms the 'mère-putain' dichotomy. This is emphasised all the more by Rena's decision to enlarge the photographs of the children (110).

The mother-whore binary is refuted at the beginning of the novel too, when Rena recounts the following story:

Dans certaines boîtes de nuit à Tokyo photographiées par Araki, on voit des planches verticales en contreplaqué sur lesquelles a été esquissée une silhouette féminine grandeur nature. A l'endroit de la tête, la photo d'une vedette de cinéma ; à l'endroit du sexe, un trou. Le client peut y glisser la verge et, tout en se racontant qu'il possède la starlette, se faire manipuler par une employée assise de l'autre côté de la planche. La préposée à cet emploi, dit-on, est toujours une vieille femme, à l'apparence particulièrement repoussante mais à la technique sans pareille. 'Ah ! s'est exclamée Kerstin [...] Imagine qu'il y ait un tremblement de terre à Tokyo, que la boîte s'effondre, et qu'un de ces clients découvre qu'il vient de jouir dans la main de sa maman !'<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Patricia Marino, 'The Ethics of Sexual Objectification: Autonomy and Consent', *Inquiry*, 51 (2008), 345-364 (p. 355).

<sup>98</sup> Nancy Huston, *Infrarouge* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2012), pp. 39-40. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

The humour of this passage stems from the juxtaposition between the client's object of desire, a beautiful young star, and the agent of his physical pleasure, an elderly woman who is, potentially, his own mother. In addition, the wooden effigy and photograph of a young woman's face figuratively accentuates women's passive object-status within mainstream pornography, in accordance with Huston's views (130) and those of many anti-pornography feminists.<sup>99</sup> This is subsequently overturned once a woman takes on an active subjective role and the male client that of object of the reader's gaze and the woman's manipulation (in more ways than one). This apposition also entails a playful revision of the gap between lived sexual experience and its representation, and alludes to the machinations of our subconscious which come to inform our pleasure in ways unknown to us. All these cases make us question our preconceptions about the subjects privileged in normative pornography in terms of age and personal past.

### **A Feminine Lens**

This subversive writing style of Huston's is metonymically reflected via the motif of Rena's infrared photography which underpins the novel, prompting a reflection on how to represent sex visually and textually. Rena's favourite photography project, for one, aptly named '*N(o)us*', is said to encompass the following:

des gens nus endormis, corps de tous âges, couleurs et sexes, obèses ou faméliques, lisses ou ravagés, glabres ou hirsutes, marqués de tatouages, de taches de naissance ou de cicatrices, rêvant et respirant, lovés sur eux-mêmes dans le bel abandon du sommeil, sans défense, si vulnérables et si mortels...Tous, tous sont beaux. (155)

This mise-en-abyme draws attention to multiple subjects underrepresented in pornography, and challenges existing sexual representations such as Robert Mapplethorpe's phallic photographs condemned on the previous page (154). Where Huston describes the latter as homogenous and lifeless, with 'une symétrie maniaque' (154), Rena's images are reflective of diverse, asymmetrical bodily types which are 'beaux'.

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<sup>99</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p. 49.  
Nancy Bauer, *How to do Things with Pornography* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015), p. 4.

It is no coincidence then that Huston should have chosen Oberson's 'Dernière Extase' to feature as the cover illustration for *Infrarouge*'s 2010 edition.



### 5. Dernière extase (front cover)

The addition of the colour red to Oberson's original work (originally black and grey) ties in with the 'rouge' of the title. As for the dissipation of the man's features via the artist's strokes, this emulates the dissolution of Kamal's body through Rena's infrared technique, outlined in the scene deemed 'bad' by the Literary Review board. The passage starts with this description of Kamal, Rena's fantasised lover who she meets in a hotel lift, where Rena takes on a dominant and active role: 'je comprends que Kamal connaît aussi la passivité, qu'il est capable de se tenir immobile et de s'offrir à moi.' (46) This is followed by Rena's voluntary subjection to his desire: 'se rasseyant il s'empare de moi et je le laisse s'affairer à son tour de sa langue et de ses lèvres sur mes seins, ma nuque, mes orteils et mon ventre' (46). Rena is thus both subject and object, dominant and dominated. Likewise, Kamal is depicted as, but not reduced to, the position of sexualised object:

Et la jouissance – ce que fait la jouissance au visage d'un homme –, oh, ce n'est pas vrai que c'est toujours pareil [...] au contraire, chaque orgasme est absolument unique et c'est pourquoi j'aime tant photographier cet instant, non la première fois mais la deuxième – ou, mieux encore, la troisième, quand l'homme a lâché toutes ses amarres, quand il s'est perdu et me sait gré de cette perte. (47)

This scene diverts our attention to the man's face, unlike the 'money-shot' favoured in mainstream pornography, and the uniqueness of every ejaculation places the

emphasis on individual sexual experience. This is in opposition to conventional pornography which, according to Dines, makes abstraction of individual identity in the name of consumerism.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, this scene is inclusive of a female rather than a male gaze, as Rena still holds the camera.

This concept is reinforced when Rena explains to Kamal how she will photograph him, and why the infrared technique will allow him a certain degree of anonymity:

je dis à Kamal que pour faire cette photo je vais me servir d'une pellicule infrarouge, qui capte non la lumière visible mais la chaleur, ajoutant – ce qui n'est pas tout à fait vrai – que son visage sera du coup méconnaissable, même pour ses proches. Il consent, comme tous les autres ou presque ont consenti. (47)

The need for heat as well as light marks a shift from visual to sensorial pleasure, à la Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who advocate an *écriture féminine* rooted in a material corporeality (and a feminine one in Irigaray's case) (chapter two). Huston also exchanges a scopophilic perspective here, which Mulvey termed a male one, for a feminine aesthetic regime.<sup>101</sup> The male figure becomes the object of sexual representation, and the movement and suture of camera and man prevents us from maintaining an uninterrupted focus on the nude figure, thereby precluding any scopophilic moment, and heralding unfixity and fluidity instead to suit a feminine type of representation.

Whether such power dynamics are truly realistic, however, are thrown into question once we learn that this scene was a mere figment of Rena's imagination. If, as Huston suggests in *Mosaïque*, scenes from pornography often leak into lived experience, we are encouraged to wonder whether the equal gendered structure here-cited is reflective of our current reality and, if not, if it ever could be. For this reason, I am inclined to disagree with the negative criticism brought upon this passage by the Bad Sex Prize committee, and to deduce instead that this passage allows for

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<sup>100</sup> Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), p. 112.

<sup>101</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris : Minuit, 1977), pp. 57-58.  
Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la méduse et autres ironies* (Paris : Galilée, 2010), p. 55.  
Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. by Mandy Merck (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 22-34 (p. 33).



innovative insights into pornography, and into how women can mark out new lines for themselves within this discursive field.

### **Vulvas and Other Weapons**

This is most clearly shown within two passages in the novel which, when placed side by side, signal a shift from mainstream pornography to an alternative for women. The first passage is one of Rena's childhood memories when her brother forcefully persuades her to undress and reveal her genitals to some of his male friends. Despite the compromising nature of her situation, Rena spies a look of horror on these boys' faces and uses their fear to her advantage, exchanging vulnerability for full-frontal attack by chasing them with her vulva exposed: 'Euphorie de sentir ma puissance et leur terreur, j'ai avancé vers eux en exhibant mon sexe [...]' (150) Her and their positions as victim-perpetrator have become inverted. This is similar to Rena who, as Holmes asserts, 'Rather than experiencing herself as a victim [...] has developed an intense, analytical and sensual interest in men, in male bodies and the stories that they tell.'<sup>102</sup> The boys are also all children, and this is their first close sighting of a vulva (150), which harks back to Freud's theory of the castration complex. Critically, rather than the sexual scene being manipulated to enable men to come to terms with castration (in the sense of the male reader/viewer) by either fetishising the vulva, punishing the female figure (who takes the place of the mother), or diverting attention away from the vulva towards the penis, as Mulvey claims is the case in erotic cinema,<sup>103</sup> what is at stake here is a revalorisation of her female genitalia not as fetish or looked-at object of the male gaze, but as looking subject. This pornographic scene thus constitutes a means of dismantling other scenes in cinematography that manipulate the vulva in accordance with male needs, and reflects a way of reclaiming the female sex for women. The element of humour in this passage, moreover, presents word-play and laughter as a powerful strategy of resistance. The fact that this scene takes place early in Rena's life also presents this as a key determinant of her sexuality to come, and goes some way in explaining her sexual empowerment and creative control in sex as a mature woman.

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<sup>102</sup> Holmes, *op. cit.* [pp. currently unavailable].

<sup>103</sup> Mulvey, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Our attention is then drawn to the artwork of Nobuyoshi Araki (a contemporary Japanese artist and photographer) in which female genitalia figure predominantly. The narrative voice affirms the artist's decision to represent the beauty of the vagina and uterus, asserting that the vagina represents: 'le néant d'avant et d'après l'être.' (151) The vagina is thus referred to as the ultimate symbol of presence not absence, in being indispensable to the production of life. By emphasising the vagina's position as the primary subject of maternity, Huston delegitimises the Lacanian tradition of psychosexual development theory. This passage deflects the male perspective on the vagina which rendered it an adjunct object, identifiable only as a relative term to the penis, inscribed within a semantic sphere of negativity as Irigaray made clear (chapter two).<sup>104</sup>

The narrative voice then explains that, unlike Araki, 'Si peu de femmes [...] ont peint ou photographié le sexe viril, pourtant réputé tellement visible !' (151) The female sex is a common feature of artworks by men, whilst female artists have attributed considerably less attention to the male sex. Even Rena, we are told, failed to photograph the male member (152). One can interpret both references to Araki's works as an invitation to women to use their pens – as Rena as a little girl does her vulva – as a vehicle of defence, attack or both; to transcribe their and their male counterparts' genitalia and sexual activity in writing, refuting several critics' description of writing as a phallic process (as identified by Terry Lovell),<sup>105</sup> and responding instead to the immortal words of Cixous: 'on va leur *montrer* nos sexes !'<sup>106</sup> Huston reiterates this invitation in very direct terms in her reply to the Literary Review. She declines to attend the Bad Sex Award ceremony, but writes with good humour 'I hope this prize will incite thousands of British women to take close-up photos of their lovers' bodies in all states of array and disarray.'<sup>107</sup> In this novel, Huston is inviting us to turn to pornography as a means of dismantling existing representations of women, which often fail to account for the vagina and maternity, contrary to Araki's and Huston's work. Furthermore, as Holmes reminds us, Rena

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<sup>104</sup> Irigaray, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>105</sup> Terry Lovell, 'Writing Like a Woman: A Question of Politics', in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 90-93 (pp. 90-93).

<sup>106</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>107</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'Bad Sex Award Goes to Nancy Huston's "Babies and Bedazzlements"', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2012.

‘feels no desire to photograph them [penises] isolated from the whole man.’<sup>108</sup> The pornographic portraits which she produces, like Huston, are anything but dehumanising.

### **Conclusion**

This novel thus expresses a fascination with the subjects privileged in standardised pornography, such as those critiqued in *Mosaïque*, and proposes alternative subject-foci: reinstating the older, maternal figure, celebrating heterogenous bodily forms, and privileging the vagina and vulva rather than the penis. Huston’s pornographic scenes also portray pleasure as a sensual and personal experience, contrary to the dehumanisation processes she claims to be at work in dominant pornographic imagery, and problematises dialectics in play in pornography such as that of subject-object, passive-active, dominated-dominant, looker-looked-at. Far from allowing a neat synthesis to emerge, Huston exploits a fluid form to displace a unilateral representation of female sexuality. In so doing, she rewrites the pornographic form *for* women, and prospectively *by* women, in so far as she encourages us as readers to follow in her stead.

### **1.3 (Hyper)Conformity as Counter-Narrative in Arcan’s *Folle* and *A Ciel ouvert***

Arcan’s autofictional novels *Folle* (2004) and *A Ciel ouvert* (2007) (the former an autobiography with fictional elements, the latter a fictional novel with autobiographical undertones) tell the story of women marked in irreversible ways by pornography, prostitution, fashion and plastic surgery. In *Folle*, Arcan pre-empted her own suicide, and in both novels women’s objectification is portrayed as an inexorable quality of human life. Adhering to Foucault’s theorisation in *Histoire de la sexualité*, power, discourse and sexuality are inextricably linked in Arcan’s work: women internalise the male gaze and dominant sexual discourses of the time, and rather than escaping them must bear their consequences.<sup>109</sup> Arcan’s critique of dominant sexual discourses thus spans much further than that of Huston or Ernaux,

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<sup>108</sup> Holmes, *op. cit.* [pp. currently unavailable].

<sup>109</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I : La Volonté de savoir* (Paris : Gallimard, 1976), pp. 41-42 and 128-130.

and her literature does not offer solutions or emancipatory alternatives as they do. Indeed, both her novels are orientated by a nihilistic perspective; a common trope in Arcan's literature and a reminder of her suicide in 2009, five years after *Folle*'s publication, and two after *A Ciel ouvert*'s.<sup>110</sup> In light of this event, it is perhaps unsurprising that her novels are marked by narratives of death and disenchantment. Many critics such as Boisclair, Delvaux and Larochelle, however, imply that Arcan's fatalistic response to hegemonic discourses possesses a certain testimonial functionality and thus evades absolute nihilism.<sup>111</sup> Hopelessness acts as a testimony of oppression, which gives us cause to hope that things might one day improve.

This oxymoronic idiom is symptomatic of what many critics refer to as Arcan's paradoxical persona, being at once denigrated prostitute and cherished author (chapter four).<sup>112</sup> Her dual identity (what Huston terms Arcan's 'dédoublement') is further emphasised by her two legal identities: Isabelle Fortier who died at the age of 36, and Nelly Arcan who died aged 34,<sup>113</sup> as well as her pseudonym as an escort, Cynthia (chapters two and four). This multi-faceted identity is useful from a feminist point of view since her direct experience of prostitution means that she can legitimately call out the negative effects of these industries on women, as an author. Whilst anti-pornography activists have been critiqued by sex-positive feminists for upholding what Jessica Spector terms an 'us/them, good-woman/whore' dichotomy, Arcan's arguments are validated by her position as both 'good-woman' and 'whore'.<sup>114</sup> The female protagonists in *Folle* and *A Ciel ouvert* convey similarly complex personalities, being politically and intellectually engaged,

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<sup>110</sup> Catherine Handfield, 'Le Suicide a toujours été son obsession', *La Presse*, 26 September 2009.

<sup>111</sup> Martine Delvaux and Isabelle Boisclair, 'Le Party d'anniversaire', in *Je veux une maison faite de sorties de secours : Réflexions sur la vie et l'œuvre de Nelly Arcan*, ed. by Claudia Larochelle (Montréal : VLB Éditeur, 2015), pp. 119-135 (pp. 123-124, 126 128 and 131).

<sup>112</sup> In *Je Veux une maison*: Danielle Laurin, 'La Première fois, la dernière fois', pp. 28-34 (p.30).;

Bruce Benderson and Carl LeBlanc, 'Caniches roses, pâtes infectes et blagues pornos', pp. 99-118 (pp. 108 and 112).;

Delvaux and Boisclair, 'Le Party d'Anniversaire', pp. 123-124, 126, 128 and 131.

<sup>113</sup> Huston, *Carnets*, p. 73.

<sup>114</sup> Jessica Spector, 'Obscene Division: Feminist Liberal Assessments of Prostitution Versus Feminist Liberal Defenses of Pornography', in *Prostitution and Pornography: Philosophical Debate About the Sex Industry*, ed. by Jessica Spector (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), pp. 419-445 (p. 425).

and greatly invested in their appearance. In both novels, this double-bind is consolidated by the gendered stereotypes and power dynamics privileged in sex and beauty enterprises. *Folle* takes the form of a socio-political commentary and draws heavily on Arcan's own experiences to condemn prostitution and pornography, whilst Arcan exploits the fictional form in *A Ciel ouvert* to satirise fashion and plastic surgery. I will start with *Folle*, discussing prostitution, pornography and the problems these industries pose to women, particularly sex-workers (chapters two and three) in terms of sexual pleasure, freedom and a cohesive sense of identity. I will then turn to *A Ciel ouvert* to explore how the female characters and voices negotiate these sites of male-domination, both fatalistically accepting and dramatically subverting them.

### ***Folle***

*Folle* is envisaged as a letter to the heroine's ex-boyfriend as she ruminates about their failed relationship, and – given the references to her impending suicide –<sup>115</sup> as a figurative substitute for her own remains (205) (chapter four). The novel is thus structured around the character of her ex (or boyfriend at the time the story is told), yet he remains silent within this narrative, and we only learn about his views through the omniscient narrative voice. In particular, we are made aware of his insatiable appetite for pornography, and that he is in the process of writing a book about his opinions on the subject (all positive or neutral at most). The sticking point is that the key protagonist has already published a book (the very thing which attracted him to her in the first place), and that *Folle* in its entirety constitutes a much more critical review of pornography, as well as prostitution. This will be my initial focus. I will then query the extent to which the heroine deals effectively with the dangers endemic to the sex industry when, to all intents and purposes, she gives into them. Though this is an autofictional novel, I will also take the liberty of referring to the narrative voice and key protagonist as Arcan in keeping with the name used on the blurb, by many critics and Arcan herself (chapter four), though I am aware that the views and character depictions are not meant to be wholly autobiographical.

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<sup>115</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Folle* (Paris : Seuil, 2004), pp. 94 and 144. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

### The Pitfalls of Pornography...

Arcan's incrimination of pornography is diametrically opposed to the views of her boyfriend. For him, one must accept the prevalence of pornography today, and relinquish religion once and for all. He claims pornography can unite couples and heal people, and is now prescribed by doctors (98). This scene alludes to Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* where he refers to discourse as the key source of power which informs our sexuality.<sup>116</sup> Here too, it is owing to medical and social discourses on normative sexuality that pornography can retain its power. Far from perceiving this normalisation as a sign of progress, Arcan claims that our era of communication equates to 'la chance pour tous de se branler sur le Net dans la nouveauté, dans le dernier cri du primitif et devant ce qui nous chante comme [...] des fillettes de dix ans qui meurent de sucer des queues.' (31-32) Like Foucault, Arcan's outlook on sexual discourse goes against the notion of teleological progress.<sup>117</sup> Pornographic discourse recreates a cavemanesque culture, in which gendered relations of power boil down to sexual acts, with women being overpowered by men.

Arcan thus attests to the participation of pornography in the standardisation of female oppression, particularly with regards to the eroticisation of young, prepubescent girls (30). When it comes to what she terms 'Girls of the Net',<sup>118</sup> Arcan distinguishes between fully-fledged porn-stars, and the girls who figure on such sites as Barely Legal for which Arcan acted at the age of twenty. Arcan explains that she was asked to 'childify' herself ('On m'a demandé de sortir de mes placards les restes de mon enfance pour choisir ce qui conviendrait' [188]). There is what Delvaux would term a 'sexualisation de l'enfance' in play.<sup>119</sup> Arcan explains that the scene was set to appeal to a paedophilic audience, with her being placed in a bath to generate the classic scene where a man rubs a girl's shoulder; 'dans l'espoir de se faire savonner la queue en retour' (190). Arcan goes on to describe scenes of a similar nature in cyber-pornography, typically of young girls staring fixedly at the camera to

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<sup>116</sup> Foucault, *op.cit.*, pp. 41-42 and 128-130.

<sup>117</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. with intro. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell UP, 1980), pp. 139-164 (pp.139-140).

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in English in the novel.

<sup>119</sup> Martine Delvaux, *Les Filles en série : Des Barbies aux Pussy Riot* (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2013), p. 47.

recreate the feel of a family photograph (102). In such cases, cyber-pornography no longer belongs to the world of fantasy, as many pro-pornography feminists have argued,<sup>120</sup> but attempts to render the experience less fantastical, in keeping with Gail Dines' view that 'the fantasy cruelty of porn spills over into the real world.'<sup>121</sup> In this way, Arcan stresses a causal relationship between pornography and paedophilia or, at best, the eroticisation of a young body. Indeed, upon finding that she and her boyfriend could not access the photographs of her on Barely Legal, not only is her boyfriend disappointed (185), but so too is Arcan, having wanted to salvage the memory of herself as a younger woman (92). Pornography thus instils a desire in women to remain young in order to appeal to a male desire directed by pornographic norms, and normalises the sexualisation of young girls (incidentally, a 2002 survey showed that the majority of prostitutes in Quebec are sixteen to twenty years old).<sup>122</sup>

Secondly, Arcan explains how pornography legitimises the dehumanisation of women, in keeping with Dines' claim that producers of pornography maintain the fantasy that porn-stars are different to other women as a means of justifying porn-stars' mistreatment.<sup>123</sup> Arcan asserts that they neither excrete vaginal fluids nor show traces of faeces during anal shots (95), and she emphasises the lack of female narratives in pornography, speaking of 'des filles qui sont peut-être mortes la veille, qui sait' (32). Women acting in pornography are there to be used but not heard, and any evidence of their pleasure or even of their participation in the act are strictly forbidden. These norms directly impact on Arcan's sexual relationship with her partner. Arcan's boyfriend, an avid watcher of pornography, penetrates her dry, tight vagina 'pour [lui] [...] donner plus de plaisir' despite Arcan's discomfort (104), either unaware or unheeding of her pain. In the earlier part of the novel, moreover, her boyfriend strangles, hits and spits on her (29), and later ties up and beats her (176). Crucially, Arcan explains that his desire stems not from the beating itself but from her disempowerment; Arcan terms her role as 'colon' (176). Once Arcan voices

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<sup>120</sup> Laurence O'toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 43.

<sup>121</sup> Dines, *op. cit.*, p. xxvi.

<sup>122</sup> Frances Shaver, 'Prostitution: A Female Crime?', in *Conflict with the Law*, ed. by Ellen Adelberg and Claudia Currie (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1993), pp. 153-173, as cited in *La Prostitution : Profession ou exploitation ? Une Réflexion à poursuivre* (Québec : Conseil du statut de la femme, 2002), p. 68.

<sup>123</sup> Dines, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

her masochistic inclinations he ceases to feel any pleasure himself (176). Arcan thereby implies that women's humanity and pleasure are incompatible with men's sexual arousal, as far as it is arranged in pornography. Porn-stars are desirable as images provided their histories and narratives remain absent (94-95); an absence which *Folle* not only refuses but strives to redress.

Arcan is in a prime position to do so given her past work as a prostitute and porn-star, being forever marked in her words by having 'trop vu' (95). In the less acceptable terms of her boyfriend, she has committed '*le pire*' (91), which sets her irreversibly apart from other women (95) (chapter three). When her boyfriend asks her to watch pornography with him, for instance, she is unable to do so as calmly as his exes had because of her past (105-106), being '*la seule qui s'en affolait*' (106). Having acted as a porn-star, she cannot enjoy pornography as a viewer because she is too intimately aware of its effects on Girls of the Net, which she deems worse in some ways than those she experienced as a prostitute. To take one example, Arcan's boyfriend penetrates her whilst watching a prepubescent girl on-screen (103), using Arcan's body as a simulative device. In this scenario, Arcan is not only not subject but equally deprived of being an object of desire, serving only as entry-point for her boyfriend's penis. It is therefore understandable that Arcan should claim that sex is no longer a matter between two people, and that she feels '*de trop*' given the excess of girls on the internet (98). Viewing pornography, in Arcan's opinion, thus equates to embarking on an affair with a multitude of women who, in her case, come to replace her. As a result, she goes so far as to claim that she misses prostitution (99-100) because her clients, at least, allowed her to participate (62-63). Pornography is therefore presented as the worst of two evils. It seeps into romantic relationships beyond the screen, in a way that dehumanises women both on and off it.

### **...and Prostitution**

If the consequences of prostitution for sex-workers are marginally less harrowing, the difference is negligible. The narrator shows us in no uncertain terms that the pitfalls of prostitution are great and grave for the women working in the industry, starting with their health. Prostitutes are forbidden from showing signs of mental distress or physical ailments on websites, so as to attract more clients, and Arcan bitterly asks herself '*ce qu'on ramassait au bout du compte.*' (180). Arcan herself experienced several health problems (43), committed self-harm (150) and one can



safely assume that her suicide stems from a depression worsened by her previous employment (chapter four). Arcan also speaks critically of the effects of prostitution on her relationships and social status, not only whilst working as a prostitute, but years later. In fact, she asserts that ‘Sans doute que je n’ai jamais cessé d’être une pute’ (90). As the phrase ‘Sans doute’ implies, Arcan imagines people will always make assumptions about her based on her past sex work. Her boyfriend at the time certainly does, presuming that she will acquiesce to any of his whims (20), and he uses her past employment as an excuse whenever he mistreats her (29-30). The effects of Arcan’s abuse as a prostitute, then, are by no means limited to the time when she actually worked as one. As for the financial benefits, Arcan confesses that she spent all of her money – a considerable sum – since she and other prostitutes spent money as a means of dispensing with the memory of clients (50) (chapter three). She also points out in *Putain* that she gives half of her earnings to the escort agency she works for.<sup>124</sup> In times of financial affluence, moreover, her boyfriend argues that an agent should have accounted for her finances on her behalf and that he would have liked to have intervened (50). Ironically, obtaining more money can thus place prostitutes under yet another form of domination: the colonisation of their monetary freedom as well as their bodies.

This is far removed from what Despentès implies in *King Kong théorie*. The differences are worth unpicking given what this teaches us about the relationship between prostitution, power and androcentric economies, and because of the tendency to study the works of Despentès and Arcan in tandem (introduction). Despentès argues that prostitution granted her more freedom (monetary especially) than she could have gained through any legal means, in a society where women adopt what she terms ‘des postes subalternes’.<sup>125</sup> Despentès exploits the emphatic and subversive nature of prostitution as a literary theme to support a Marxist manifesto of sorts, against contemporary neo-liberal values in the Western world. Despentès presents prostitution as the most rewarding and viable route in a restrictive society, and explains that prostitution is vilified on a moral basis only as a cover for the hidden truth: that women cannot be permitted to draw benefits from sex

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<sup>124</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Putain* (Paris : Seuil, 2001), p. 30.

<sup>125</sup> Virginie Despentès, *King Kong théorie* (Paris : Grasset, 2006), p. 20.

in a patriarchal system.<sup>126</sup> Conversely, Arcan is critical of contemporary social values yet still views prostitution as the least promising of career choices. Arcan's understanding of sex in prostitution as a colonisation or violation is clear from her assimilation between her clients' penetration of her and of her abortion years later, both of which she experiences as an intrusion (72). Prostitution is thus shown by Arcan to be damaging to prostitutes in terms of their bodily and monetary autonomy, their relationships, and their mental and emotional well-being.

### **Women's Schizophrenic Bond**

These issues are not felt by prostitutes alone. In fact, Arcan indicates that prostitutes can often be treated more favourably than clients' significant other halves. She asserts that most appointments were largely spent in conversation, and that visiting men pleased her more regularly than her own boyfriend, enacting with her what they would not or could not do with their wives (51). This is ironic on two counts. Firstly, Norma Almodovar suggests, prostitution as a sale of sex is commonly assumed to be a physical act.<sup>127</sup> Secondly, Arcan is implying that clients would feel more comfortable talking to a prostitute than to their wives, and would have sex with their wives in ways unimaginable with a prostitute. Her views are this time in alignment with *King Kong théorie*, when Despentes remarks that most clients frightened her not because of their aggression but because of their fragility; their need for reassurance and a listening ear.<sup>128</sup> Such inversions challenge the Madonna-whore complex and reveal the ambiguous roles of women within a patriarchal system. Or looked at another way, this highlights the extent to which the sex industry impacts on all women.

The main message for women proposed by the sex industry is a bleak one: to be sexy is to be desired, but to be desired is to be dehumanised and often means falling victim to violence. More confusingly, Arcan proclaims that women are expected to be simultaneously sexy and unsexy (chapter two). In the case of Arcan's boyfriend, it is always he who takes the lead in sex in their relationship (60), yet he is strangely

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86.

<sup>127</sup> Norma Jean Almodovar, 'Porn Stars, Radical Feminists, Cops and Outlaw Whores: The Battle Between Feminist Theory and Reality, Free Speech, and Free Spirits', in *Prostitution and Pornography*, pp. 149-174 (p. 161).

<sup>128</sup> Despentes, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-71.

attracted to sexually experienced and dominant women (48), like a woman called Nadine who is said to have slept with over five hundred men and ten times as many women (48), described as a ‘dominatrice’ (115). Women are therefore stuck in a quagmire. They must at once be submissive and dominating, or ‘à la fois frigide et sexuellement débridée’ to quote Delvaux.<sup>129</sup>

This is supported by the account of Arcan’s television appearance at the beginning of the novel, in which she appears as ‘l’invitée d’honneur’ beside fellow erotic writer Millet (18) (chapter four). It is in this role that Arcan’s boyfriend first lays eyes on her (and not in a porn-shoot despite his extensive research into cyber-pornography) (31), and he is seduced by her status as ‘une femme de tête’ as well as her beauty (18-19). She therefore succeeds, one might think, in presenting herself as both a sex icon and intellectual. All the time they talk, however, naked images of Millet flicker on a screen behind the interviewee (18), a visual implication that her physical appearance counts for more than her intellect. Even more tellingly, Arcan is unable to watch the interview back because she affirms ‘qu’il n’y a rien de pire que de ne pas avoir le contrôle sur sa propre image qui bouge’ (191). She is similarly unable to search for photographs of herself on the internet – leftovers from her porn-star days – ‘par peur d’y voir des choses censées se produire à l’intérieur du corps’ (191). Delvaux and Catherine Mavrikakis argue that her discomfort is shared by all women with regards to their sexual objectification.<sup>130</sup> This is reinforced by references to dolls which symbolise women’s collective objectification, such as a woman collecting dolls and wanting to make a glass model of Arcan (61). This aligns with Delvaux’s *Les Filles en série*, in which dolls are an apt example of the seriality of female identity: all women must try to fit the same mould and we must hence ‘penser leur démultiplication’ (chapter two).<sup>131</sup>

### **Giving in?**

One can only wonder if there is any way for women to exit this *série*, and to be sexualised without being objectified, dehumanised or violated. A particularly

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<sup>129</sup> Delvaux, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-128.

Catherine Mavrikakis and Robin Aubert, ‘Nenenellllyyyy Arcancancan, Reine des Stands’, in *Je Veux une maison*, 195-209 (pp. 202-203).

<sup>131</sup> Delvaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

striking passage in *Folle* suggests that the answer is no. Arcan explains that she visited peep-shows from time to time, where men ejaculated on or touched her during the pornographic screenings (of other people, not Arcan) (112). She explains that she attended them ‘pour ne pas rester passif dans la destruction, c’est une question de dignité.’ (108). Her agency in entering these spaces is exerted only to secure a distressingly relative form of power – overseeing her own destruction –, and her vulnerability is accentuated by the darkness typical of peep-shows which grants the men a certain anonymity, and thus ‘une certaine impunité’.<sup>132</sup> This scene is interesting not just because of this dramatic sexual submission, moreover, but because it is framed in such a way as to produce a universal picture of male-female relations. The men’s anonymity draws a parallel with filmed pornography, where men are anonymous in front of the screen. Ana Bridges explains that owing to the absence of the pornography consumer within pornographic imagery itself, the consumer comes to think of himself and the consumer *per se* as the ‘Everyman’ which legitimises their continued use of pornography.<sup>133</sup> Here too, the anonymity of the clients allows them to stand in for all men as the dominant subject. By extension, Arcan stands in for all women, and the power structures in play echo a broader state of sexual inequality. Which, one should add, Arcan’s visits to sex-shows – where she lays herself open to male discharge and abuse – does little to combat.

There is nonetheless something positive to be said for her actions. The decision to enter such establishments in the first place shows some courage, and Arcan implies that, unlike *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* where ‘les femmes sont accommodantes’ (108), she is never completely compliant. On the contrary, she states that any time a man approached her ‘il n’était plus possible de trouver le plaisir’ (112). In short, we should not interpret her refusal to retaliate or her decision to return as a sign of passive acceptance (inaction does not equate to inertia). If, as Delvaux suggests, ‘Pour sortir de la série [des filles], il faut accepter qu’on en fait

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<sup>132</sup> As with male clients through prostitution in *Putain*, and men watching pornography, like Arcan’s boyfriend in *Folle*. Isabelle Boisclair, ‘Cyberpornographie et effacement du féminin dans *Folle* de Nelly Arcan’, *Globe : Revue internationale d’études québécoises*, 12.2 (2009), 71-82 (p. 82).

<sup>133</sup> Ana J. Bridges, ‘Methodological Considerations in Mapping Pornography Content’, in *Everyday Pornography*, ed. by Karen Boyle (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 34-49 (p. 39).

partie',<sup>134</sup> we can define Arcan's actions as a *productive* form of acceptance: a small step away from female seriality. Once an oppressive system is recognised, as well as our place within it, it becomes easier to tackle. Acceptance can therefore be reconfigured as an initial strategy of resistance. For the remainder of this section, I will argue that the narrative voice in *A Ciel ouvert* similarly problematises the conceptualisation of women as objects and images, whilst putting to use an even more extreme acceptance of "the facts of life" to undermine them.

### *A Ciel ouvert*

The female protagonists in *A Ciel ouvert* are very much a part of this *série*. The heroine Rose is a successful fashion photographer and Julie, her neighbour, an award-winning documentary maker who focuses on paedophilia and cosmetic surgery. Both women compete for the attention of one man, Charles, dramatically transforming their bodies in the process: Rose through lip augmentations, Julie by cutting herself. This is to satiate his fetish for surgical interventions and wounds on women's bodies, which we learn is inspired by his father's misogynist delusions and profession as butcher. Julie and Rose's attempts to seduce Charles through these extreme measures exacerbate his fetish so that, like his father, he becomes delusional. In the end, Rose undergoes a vaginoplasty operation, and later reveals her post-surgery vulva to Julie, Charles and their spectating neighbours whilst on-set for the filming of one of Julie's documentaries. Rose exposes herself in this way to attract Charles' attention and incite his desire but, instead, he considers this a personal betrayal (at the acme of his delusional state). Unable to cope with Rose's unorthodox act of unfaithfulness, he throws himself from the rooftop to his death. As such, the female protagonists' actions inadvertently result in the death of the man they desire.

The novel is split into two sections: the first constitutes a socio-political critique of women's condition, while the second tells the story of Charles, Julie and Rose's declining relationships. I will begin with the former, examining how women's sexuality is shown to act in the interest of male desire to the detriment of their own subjectivity. I will then explore the ways in which this unequal gendered dynamic is

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<sup>134</sup> Chantal Guy, 'Martine Delvaux : De la production des filles', *La Presse*, 14 December 2013.

shown to be shaped and preserved by the sex and beauty industries. Finally, I will focus on the fetishistic elements of the story, to outline how the presentation of Rose's actions simultaneously reflects and contests dominant discourses pertaining to female sexuality. I will show how, through a satirical narrator, these actions allow a protest call to emerge that both oversteps socio-political boundaries, and recalls how hard it is to do so.

### **Sexual Desire and Female Objectification**

Sexual desire and female objectification are inextricably linked from the outset of *A Ciel ouvert*. The novel opens with Julie sunbathing beneath the open sky, foreshadowing the end of the novel where Charles terms Rose's vulva 'ce sexe à ciel ouvert' as he falls to his death with his face turned towards the clouds (Julie's documentary is staged on the communal roof terrace, meaning that when Rose exposes her vulva she does so quite literally beneath the open sky).<sup>135</sup> This correlation intimates that sex, not God, dominates the protagonists' lives, as emphasised by Charles' additional references to Rose's vulva as 'la Volonté' and 'la Vérité' (237), and when Julie states that the sunny day 'donnait l'impression de s'être agenouillé, prosterné sur le corps de Montréal' (11). This again pre-empts the end where Charles genuflects before Rose's vulva (239). This hyper-sexualised imagery is extended to the most banal of locales, with a gym being described as the setting of an orgy (137), and Rose claiming that: 'C'était une erreur de dire qu'à la naissance on sortait d'un sexe parce qu'en fait on y restait pris [...] la vie n'allait jamais ailleurs que dans le sexe [...]' (179). Here lies the underlying moral and *fil conducteur* of the novel: sex (metonymically connoted by Rose's genitals) determines all human behaviour. Such is the way of the world it seems, since the main neighbourhood of the novel constitutes 'un voisinage planétaire' (7). What is more, in the opening scene where Rose and Julie silently observe one another, Julie privately reflects on their mutual investment in plastic surgery as two women in their early thirties (15-16). According to the omniscient narrative voice they are beautiful only because of their will and efforts, a non-negotiable link to 'la Volonté'; the

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<sup>135</sup> Nelly Arcan, *A Ciel ouvert* (Paris : Seuil, 2007), p. 250. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

sexual drive which controls the narrative and, according to Charles, the world (250). Sexual desire therefore acts as a catalyst for women's auto-objectification.

From the very beginning, this omnipresent sexual desire is presented as a male-oriented affair, suggested by Rose's discussion of male and female desire:

Rose [...] avait cette théorie que les hommes n'étaient pas matière à érection pour les femmes, que c'était au contraire le sexe des hommes qui était une loupe qu'ils promenaient sur le corps des femmes pour en connaître le grain, et qu'ensuite seulement venait l'érection des femmes, au contact de la loupe, dans laquelle elles se contemplaient elles-mêmes. (39)

Arcan marries Lacanian theory on the Phallus with that of the mirror stage,<sup>136</sup> with the woman in this scenario recognising herself as subject by looking into the Phallus-as-mirror. In so doing she is deprived of her subjective being *pour soi* since this process occurs through and for the penis, in keeping with Lacan's view that sexual development occurs mainly in relation to the Phallus. In addition, man as object of desire is expelled from sex in this scene, given that 'l'érection des femmes' stems not from a man or male member but from woman's own reflection (albeit mediated by the Phallus). Female pleasure here is thus inextricably linked to women's position as a sexed object; women recognise themselves as subjects (by looking in the mirror) once they acknowledge their object-position (the mirror).

More obviously still, there is no female gaze to speak of aside from women looking back at themselves from a male and phallic perspective. This recalls John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and his argument that women have historically been 'kept' and protected by men, and have thus come to view themselves as men might do causing 'woman' to 'continually watch herself'.<sup>137</sup> This caused 'women's self-being [to be] split in two', as woman-as-observer (male 'surveyor') and women-as-observed (female 'surveyed').<sup>138</sup> As a result, women transmute themselves into visual objects for men in compliance with perceived male tastes.<sup>139</sup> This merging of the male gaze and phallic perspective, moreover, via the magnifying glass ('loupe') and phallus ('le sexe des hommes'), echoes Stephen Heath's assertion that the male

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<sup>136</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris : Seuil, 1966), p. 693.

<sup>137</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 46.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

gaze stands in for the phallus in sexual representation.<sup>140</sup> This correlation means that the woman as looked-at object signifies not castration, but the phallus, indicating that women's position as looked-at objects must remain a fixture of sexual representation to deflect men's fear of castration. Her status as looked-at object works not for the sake of female pleasure, but to secure men's by disavowing the site of castration. In this way, women's sexual identity thus exists not for itself but as an offshoot of the male gaze and castration complex.

### **A Critique of the Sex and Beauty Industries**

Arcan draws a correlation between these structures and those common to prostitution. Putting forward her own view on the causes of sexual difference, Rose explains that in a secular, market-driven society the most beautiful female specimens acquired high market value and could be sold, according to what the narrative voice terms a 'logique darwinienne' (178). This analogy is reiterated when Rose refers to her mother and sister 'quittant les unes après les autres le clan femelle pour se coller aux mâles' (178). The reference to a 'clan' alludes to tribalism, and the terms 'femelle' and 'mâles' hold animalistic connotations in French. The status-quo of a Godless age is not a progressive one then, but a modern revival of natural selection and a survival of the fittest ethos. Certainly in *A Ciel ouvert* Arcan depicts women as doomed to rivalry for male attention and desire, each motivated by a prevailing refrain quoted in *Burqa de chair*, 'miroir, miroir, dis-moi qui est la plus belle'.<sup>141</sup>

These behavioural patterns are shown to be exacerbated by the beauty industries, particularly fashion. During a fashion shoot in *A Ciel ouvert*, female models are scantily clad and guided by directors to adopt positions akin to those in pornography: spreading their legs, kissing, and touching other women's breasts (212). Rose is responsible for styling models ahead of shoots, which she says consisted in 'undressing' women to ensure the erection of male viewers: 'les vêtements qu'elle leur choisissait ne devaient pas les revêtir mais les déshabiller. Elle était une arrangeuse de chair à faire envier, ou bander.' (27-28) Rose's boyfriend Charles, who works alongside her as a photographer, also struggles to capture natural shots of the models since they often pout and conform to clichés (212). Stereotypes from

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Difference', in *The Sexual Subject*, pp. 47-106 (p. 77).

<sup>141</sup> Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, pp. 24-25.



pornography are internalised and remobilised by women, and operate in the interest of male desire. What Wolf famously deemed ‘the beauty myth’ is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy and propagates the notion that, as Hilary Lips puts it, ‘women’s only effective source of feminine influence is beauty and sex appeal.’<sup>142</sup> This is also a reminder that, as Foucault expounded, ‘les relations de pouvoir ne sont pas en position d’extériorité à l’égard d’autres types de rapport (processus économiques, rapports de connaissance, relations sexuelles), mais [...] leur sont immanentes’, and that ‘le pouvoir vient d’en bas’.<sup>143</sup> Power is immanent within the beauty industry here, and emanates not from a higher authority but from the female actors within it, through whom sexualised social and cultural narratives on beauty are circulated.

Rose’s role as photographer, however, grants her comparatively more power. The omniscient narrative voice even describes Rose as consuming the women she photographs (45). If photography is a means of objectifying women, Rose is exempt as the spectating subject. This is not to say, though, that Rose escapes conformity, as is evident during a photoshoot for Julie’s documentary where Rose takes centre stage. She poses for Charles whilst lathering herself in sun cream – a sexual innuendo which further alludes to pornography – despite Charles’ assertion that: ‘Être un bon modèle c’est se plier à la consigne, et la consigne est d’accepter d’être photographié hors de la pose.’ (231) Needless to say, he considers her a ‘mauvais modèle’ (230). Rose refuses to relinquish her performance because in her opinion ‘la contrariété ne peut pas être exploitée, comme tu dis. Si oui, ça reste du jeu, c’est encore de la pose.’ (230-231) By conforming to pornographic clichés, Rose ironically acts outside of the rules enforced by Charles and takes charge of the script. Rose thus employs her object-status and sexualisation to gain control, thereby evading facile judgements about female emancipation, and her playful response to the shoot assignment additionally draws attention to the inescapability of performance.

Performance is depicted as a fundamental characteristic of the feminine condition and is best conveyed in *A Ciel ouvert* through the motif of cosmetic surgery. It personifies the double-bind of female identity, what the omniscient narrative voice

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<sup>142</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), pp. 2-3.  
Hilary Lips, *Women, Men and Power* (Mayfield: Mountain View, 1991), p. 19.

<sup>143</sup> Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, pp. 124-125.

terms ‘le grand paradoxe de la coquetterie féminine, de la mascarade’ (120), and Arcan asserts that ‘Dans toutes les sociétés, des plus traditionnelles aux plus libérales, le corps des femmes n’était pas montrable, enfin pas en soi, pas en vrai’ (183-184). The basic premise of this paradox is twofold. Firstly, whilst many women undergo surgical operations to enhance their appearance, they must simultaneously reinforce the illusion of natural youth. Such an endeavour, however, is virtually impossible because the artificiality of their appearance betrays them. Secondly, whilst women are increasingly visible and unclothed in the media and pornography (183), the representation of natural women (so to speak) is becoming less frequent. A comparable quandary is brought forward by Huston in *Reflets dans un œil d’homme*, when she claims that women are free to vote, work and ‘se recouvrir de ce que Nelly Arcan appelle une “burqa de chair” et de s’enfermer de son propre gré dans ce que Fatema Mernissi appelle le “harem de taille 38”’, and when she states that ‘le nu intégral est à peu près aussi libérateur que l’islam intégriste.’<sup>144</sup> This parallel is reinforced in Arcan’s novel when Julie envisages a documentary entitled ‘Burqa de Chair’ about plastic surgery (185), a precursor to Arcan’s posthumous text of the same name. The recurrence of this expression reinforces the idea that all women are obliged to reject their bodies *en soi*, and to veil themselves in layers of artifice.

Plastic surgery is a particularly dangerous influence in this regard, in so far as it finalises the misogynist project of pornography and the fashion industry: to make all women look the same and reinforce the figure of the ideal woman, in alignment with Delvaux’s view in *Filles en série*.<sup>145</sup> In fact, Delvaux equates dolls to the women in Arcan’s works when she describes Barbie as ‘la burqa de chair de Nelly Arcan version jouet’.<sup>146</sup> Women are bound to conform to a set mould like dolls – their own ‘burqas de chair’ – as in Hans Bellmers’ figurative depictions of his partner Unica Zürn cited in Delvaux’s work. Bellmer was a German surrealist artist whose works consisted largely in life-size pubescent dolls, often contorted, broken or deconstructed. It is particularly worth comparing Bellmer’s *La Poupée* series to Arcan’s corpus, despite the formal, geographical and temporal distance (the former a fine art piece produced in 1930s Paris, and the latter a Quebecois publication at the

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<sup>144</sup> Huston, *Reflets dans un œil d’homme*, p. 292.

Fatema Mernissi, *Le Harem et l’occident* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2001), p. 211.

<sup>145</sup> Delvaux, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

start of the millennium), and the differences between their aesthetic and political objectives (Bellmer's treatment of the female figure arises from the objectification of women and idealisation of pre-pubescent femininity that Arcan is critiquing).<sup>147</sup> Namely, both creative representations of women prefigure living women's fates. These compositions of Bellmer's are not only harrowing but pre-emptive of Zürn's suicide by defenestration,<sup>148</sup> whilst Arcan posted a photograph on her (unpublished<sup>149</sup>) online blog just hours before hanging herself, of what Huston terms 'une visée en plongée d'une poupée Barbie grandeur nature, étalée sur le dos, apparemment à la suite d'une chute [...]'.<sup>150</sup>

These kindred fates convey a bleak message about ideals of femininity, where escape from oppression takes the form of death. Delvaux explains that such ideals work in the interest of a masculine fantasy, which seeks 'une féminité inorganique et inanimée' and depends on the relegation of women to the realm of childhood.<sup>151</sup> Accepted ideals surrounding feminine beauty thus correlate to paedophilic tendencies, to which plastic surgery is shown to contribute in *A Ciel ouvert*. There are references to women wanting smaller reproductive parts through vaginoplasty to emulate a child's anatomy (171), which Rose opts for despite the reservations of her surgeon (173). The result is a prepubescent vulva, devoid of pubic hair, and vagina incapable of producing menstrual blood (122).

### **Overstepping Boundaries?**

Rose's vaginoplasty nonetheless grants her a certain power, albeit relative. Primarily, Rose's coercion of her surgeon into committing to her operation testifies to her agency. Additionally, Charles' distorted sexuality and fetishistic obsession must be taken into account. Charles' father was mentally unstable and held theories about murderous, Amazonian women – the enemies of men –, and about an all-seeing eye ('troisième œil par le sexe qui voyait tout venir de loin') intent on men's demise (59). He also worked as a butcher, often locking Charles in a meat freezer for hours

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<sup>147</sup> Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1936, photograph album.

<sup>148</sup> Huston, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>149</sup> Fabien Loszach, 'Postface', in *nellyarcan.com*  
<<http://nellyarcan.com/pages/postface.php>> [accessed 14 December 2017]

<sup>150</sup> Huston, *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*, p. 219.

<sup>151</sup> Delvaux, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

(59-60). It then transpires that Charles formed a fetish for post-surgery wounds on women, as well as cosmetically enhanced body parts (particularly breasts) (112 and 175). Rose satiates his fetish through lip surgery and vaginoplasty (107), and Julie by cutting her breasts and inner thighs (192-194), reminiscent of Arcan's self-harm cited in *Folle*. The sources of Charles' fetish are therefore clearly established: the Amazonian women, female genitals and eye symbolise the castrating mother, and the meat inspires his fetish for wounded flesh. There is also a link to be made between butcher's meat, wounded women's flesh, and Arcan's text and Julie's documentary 'Burqa de Chair' about plastic surgery users. This is reinforced in Arcan's article 'L'Enfant dans le miroir', one of the articles presented in *Burqa de chair* itself, when she describes herself looking in the mirror as a piece of 'charcuterie' for the first time (chapter two). The wider functionality of this imagery is twofold: it sets up the Freudian structures to be capitalised on at a later stage, and highlights a loaded symmetry between the meat and beauty industries.

Rose and Julie adopt antithetical approaches to Charles' fetishism. Rose happily yields to his eccentricities as a way of securing his fidelity (since other women would be unlikely to grant him similar favours) (106), whilst Julie (who seduces Charles and replaces Rose as his girlfriend) is never quite as 'consentante', despite going further in her efforts to please him (192-194). Although Julie indulges his fantasies by scarring her own body (192-194), she considers his fetish an illness (his 'dieu' [191]) advising him to seek professional advice (188). In the end it is Julie who falls ill from exhaustion and stress, being described as a carcass (192-194). This transition serves as a catalyst for Charles' shame and consequent mental decline (194). He begins to experience similar hallucinations to his father, perceiving the same all-seeing-eye (188). Rose, on the other hand, capitalises on Charles' fetish to regain his affection and vanquish her rival, Julie, for his attention (176). Whilst Julie attempts to cure Charles of his fetish for his sake, pandering to his whims with open disdain, Rose liberally indulges him and exploits his fetish to her advantage. These polarised outlooks provide a nuanced portrayal of consent and agency, with Rose gaining the upper-hand regardless of her dominated, fetishised and objectified position.

Halfway through the novel, Rose notices that Charles is still looking up images of plastic surgery wounds online (his illicit penchant), leading Rose to believe that Julie is not enough for Charles: 'autant de preuves que Julie n'était pas la Femme,

n'avait pas le Totale, ne portait pas le Sexe.' (175). She plans to reveal her new vulva to him in front of Julie, making Charles (she hopes) wild with desire, so that Julie can bear witness to the fact that Rose, not Julie, is the only one for him (176). The turning point however, occurs once Charles' madness (spurred on partly by Julie's attempts to normalise him, not without a little irony) coincides with Rose's transformation. Rose sends him some photographs of her vulva hoping to arouse him, but Charles interprets her disfigured genitalia as an incarnation of the all-seeing-sex his father spoke of (232). Within the vulva he sees an eye through which he hears his father saying: "Mon fils, je m'étais trompé. Les femmes ne sont pas nos ennemis. Rose, leur chef, est l'Amazone, la voie.' (237) The voice also instructs Charles to follow Rose's voice and obey her (236). Though this is a figment of Charles' imagination, it is clear that Arcan is setting up an antithetical 'voie' to sex and beauty industries. Here, it is women who lead the way and men who must follow. Furthermore, this allows for a revision of the Lacanian model of sexual subjectivity. Lacan maintained that sexual subjectivity is split into two gendered categories – 'active/masculine and passive/feminine' – which Rose problematises by actively embodying the feminine position of passive, looked-at object ('le Sexe') and passively embodying that of looker (the third eye).<sup>152</sup> Rose's position as subject of the gaze is especially crucial. Unbeknownst to her, she usurps the place of the Amazonian women and third eye in Charles' hallucinations (each representative of the castrating mother) and thus figuratively castrates Charles.

Rose continues with her plan on the night of Julie's photoshoot for her 'Burqa de Chair' documentary, filmed on the same rooftop described at the beginning of the novel. Rose is excited for her grand unveiling, which she believes will stimulate Charles' desire beyond imagination and, once photographed, serve as a source of enjoyment for other male fetishists (237). She thus hopes to contribute to that same online pornographic community which inspired her operation. However, her plan does not unfold as intended. Rose gathers the neighbours to see her vulva, saying "Venez voir le clou du documentaire de Julie O'Brien ! Jetez un œil sur le destin de la Femme-Vulve ! Venez en admirer la tenue !" (247). The neighbours comply, assuming this is a documentary in-the-making, and Charles is horrified to see Rose exposed in this way: he is not, after all, The Chosen One, specially selected to view

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<sup>152</sup> Mandy Merck, 'General Introduction', in *The Sexual Subject*, pp. 1-14 (p. 1).

the chief of the Amazonians' (Rose's) vulva (249). Both Julie and Charles flee the scene, and Rose's plan subsequently falls through since neither of her intended viewers are present (249). In the end, Charles believes he has failed in his life's mission, having failed the third eye and throws himself from the balcony, giving up his body to the sky which the narrative voice refers to as a 'sexe' opening up before him (250-251). The title of the novel *A Ciel ouvert* thus becomes arguably synonymous with *A Sexe ouvert* (defining Rose in the final scene) and reverts to the opening message that sex is omniscient and omnipresent.

### **Hyper-conformity as Counter-narrative**

There are multiple ways in which Rose's plans constitute a counter-discursive strategy. For one thing, whilst the women in *A Ciel ouvert* are oppressed by beauty ideals which relegate women to the role of object, Rose exploits this position by becoming 'le Sexe', 'la Femme'. Yet she also becomes a monster as she refers to Michael Jackson and Donatella Versace earlier in the novel, who disfigure themselves beyond recognition through plastic surgery (183). Her transformation thus signifies a dramatic break from the norm of feminine beauty, by embodying the monstrous figure of the abject which, according to Kristeva 'ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles', and which disturbs 'une identité, un système, un ordre.'<sup>153</sup> Rose thus hyperbolises the colonisation of women's bodies by beauty industries who pedal and profit from ideals of female beauty and desirability, by becoming the ideal *par excellence* of 'la Femme'. After all, the narrative voice refers to many other women seeking out vaginal reductions like Rose's (171). As such, by conforming to very real practices and exaggerating them to the extreme, Rose serves as a mirror to the feminine condition. By metamorphosing into an abject form, what Kristeva described as being outside of social norms, Rose reflects the logical endpoint of social conventions on feminine beauty.

In addition, Rose likens her vulva to transsexuals in Madrid, whom she terms 'femmes-vulves' (222). Ironically, therefore, by turning her vulva into 'le Sexe' Rose loses her gender-specificity and is reborn as neither woman nor man, but as sex *en soi* (as the 'femmes-vulves' are presented). She embodies her own mode of oppression by making it her body, saying that her sex covered her from head to toe

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<sup>153</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur : Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris : Seuil, 1980), p. 12.

(222). Yet as Rose herself explains, heterosexual men too enjoy the ‘masquerade’ of transsexuality (99), the term masquerade consonant with the earlier references to masks and women’s coquettishness. These narrative additions imply that, whether someone be born a man or a woman, the defining quality of womanhood consists in artifice. Transsexuals and women alike have to transform themselves through plastic surgery, make-up and clothing to make themselves desirable to men. This harks back to Beauvoir’s celebrated view, ‘on ne naît pas femme, on le devient’, and to Butler’s theory of performativity.<sup>154</sup> It is not enough to be born woman to be one; one must perform as image and object.<sup>155</sup> Rose’s sex as caricature metonymically represents not just biological women’s condition but that of women *tout-court*. Rose’s vulva being ‘le Sexe’, moreover, means that it represents on some level both female and male genitals: it becomes The Phallus. Rose’s sex becomes the phallic magnifying glass discussed earlier, which controls sex and serves as a mirror to women who exist for and through the male gaze. Yet this narrative is orchestrated by Julie, Rose and the omniscient narrative voice of Arcan, and the dramatic exposition of women’s exploitation at the hands of the beauty industry symbolised by Rose’s operation condemns rather than accommodates the male gaze. The eye which Charles espies in Rose’s vulva metaphorically reflects the female gaze that emerges out of women’s oppression in this novel.

Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, written over four decades ago, is still crucial to rethinking a gendered gaze in this way. Mulvey explains that sexual cinema is geared towards a male gaze with women as its object, and that women are objectified, abused or fetishised to obliterate the memory of the site of castration and thus accommodate for male desire.<sup>156</sup> In *A Ciel ouvert*, Rose also coheres to Charles’ psychological needs by fetishising her vulva. However, Rose does so on her own terms, and her surgery grants her power over him and Julie. Additionally, Julie’s attempts to normalise Charles unintentionally cause his mental unhinging, as he starts to conceive of his fetish as a medical problem. Consequently,

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<sup>154</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe II : L’Expérience vécue* (Paris : Gallimard, 2015), p. 13.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 12.

<sup>155</sup> Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>156</sup> Mulvey, *op. cit.*, pp. 26 and 29.

Charles is disgusted when faced with Rose-as-fetish (her vulva), which culminates in his suicide. As such, the scene of castration is not disavowed in these scenarios but exploited (the death of a male subject being the ultimate outcome of the castration complex). Women are also more empowered than men here, inverting the oedipal dynamics privileged in visual sexual representation.

This achievement notwithstanding, Rose's ascension to power cannot be called a traditional victory. Her auto-fetishisation is enacted not for her own pleasure, but to reap revenge on her love rival Julie and ensure Charles' fidelity in the face of inevitable competition (73-79). We are later informed that she 'aurait aimé d'un même coup prendre la résolution de ne pas se sacrifier sur une table d'opération', but that she was resigned to the act ('c'était celle d'une force qui la dépassait') (179). Rose's transformation is therefore less a matter of choice than one of resignation, as the chain of events she hopes to initiate rests on the execution of this first operation. This is crucial to regaining Charles' unreserved attention, avenging herself of Julie and securing a place for herself as 'la Totale' within the small cyber-community of male fetishists. The first two fail to materialise, with Charles dead and Julie unaffected, which edifies Rose's definitive lack of control. Rose's reaction remains open to speculation, and the reader is left to interpret this denouement as they see fit, be that as failure or success.

## **Conclusion**

In short, Rose fails to ensure her own pleasure and to avoid oppression altogether. Likewise, Arcan informs us in *Folle* that prostitution proves debilitating for sex-workers mentally, physically, emotionally and financially, and that pornography normalises violence towards women and paedophilia; an account rendered more poignant by Arcan's personal implication in these sectors. Her submission to male desire in *Folle*, moreover, figuratively and grimly displayed in a steamy cinema, provides only a slim glimpse of resistance. *A Ciel ouvert* gives us more cause for optimism, not least because of Rose's comic antics which provide much needed light relief. Arcan's characters and narration form a critical pastiche of contemporary women's condition and condemn the beauty industry (chiefly fashion and cosmetic surgery), conceived of as the handmaiden of prostitution and pornography. Further, Arcan circumnavigates these discursive sites to secure a form of power and autonomy for her heroine, albeit relative, and to allow a feminine gaze to control the



narrative, thereby subverting phallogentric psychoanalytic structures. Arcan breaks with women's condition by satirising normative conventions of feminine beauty and, most importantly, by creating characters who embody them to their furthest extremity. By orchestrating her own hyper-sexualisation and hyper-objectification, moreover, Rose's actions problematise a victim-agent binary, and pay testament to some of the stringent limits imposed on women's sexual and bodily empowerment. In sum, Arcan's *A Ciel ouvert* intimates that one can never be outside of male-orientated, hegemonic discourses (or its damaging effects reported in *Folle*), but reveals how *hyper-conformity* can constitute a sign of protest in itself as a satirical mode of witnessing. A sign of hope too, if we share Mélanie Gleize's sentiment that 'la vie renaît toujours du pire.'<sup>157</sup>

### Conclusion

Ernaux, Huston and Arcan convey the ways in which certain sexual representations colonise people's sexuality in negative ways: objectifying and oppressing women, and reinforcing social binaries born of a patriarchal system such as the Madonna-whore complex. Ernaux forges a largely negative critique of literature, music and philosophy in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Mémoire de fille*, for presenting women as hyper-sexualised or unsexed, and paints a more nuanced picture of female sexuality in *L'Usage de la photo*. In this multimodal piece, Ernaux questions, blurs and exploits the functions proper to photography, writing and the hybrid photo-text, addressing the unspeakable – cancer, death and sex –, and instating female pleasure as a fundamental component of sexual intercourse and representation. In the same vein, Huston condemns mainstream and misogynist pornography in *Mosaïque de la pornographie* for legitimising the dominance and oppression of women, and criticises erotic writers (male and female) for producing similarly unequal structures. In *Infrarouge*, however, Huston uses the thematic device of infrared photography along with references to erotic artwork and pornography to claim what she understands by *pornographie* for women. As for Arcan, her auto-fictional novel *Folle* contains a critical evaluation of pornography and prostitution which she herself fell victim to, and highlights the male-orientation of sexual pleasure in mainstream

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<sup>157</sup> Mélanie Gleize, 'Reine/Folle de Nelly Arcan, Seuil 205 p.', *Spirale*, 204 (2015), 56-57 (p. 57).

pornography. Yet in *A Ciel ouvert*, though the characters often reinforce the idea that women should be objectified or dehumanised in sex, owing to instinctual drives, the satirical narration allows for an attack on standard misconceptions regarding female sexuality, those myths perpetuated by sex and beauty industries. In addition, women abuse themselves and one another to control men and thus contour their own demise, a paradox which metaphorically reflects Arcan's own persona. In each of these cases, the authors use one text to condemn prostitution, pornography, erotica and other representations of sex through popular mediums (namely music, literature, philosophy, the media and the beauty industry), and another to present an alternative model of sexual representation for and by women.

These nuanced discursive alternatives are told from the perspective of female protagonists, support a female gaze, and remobilise clichés prevalent in dominant discourses on sex and sexuality to deflect other stereotypes about women. In so doing, they present female desire and pleasure as a multi-faceted affair, troubling the line between power and submission, 'good' and 'bad' girls. In the next chapter, we will see how Huston, Arcan and Ernaux build on this literary model by way of *écriture féminine*, and examine what their works teach us in terms of sexual difference. Here, I conclude that all three authors incorporate and contest dominant cultural representations of women, and I will now explore how they simultaneously accept and deny materialist explanations of feminine identity, with surprising and advantageous results from a feminist standpoint.

## Chapter 2

### Sexual Difference, Friend and Foe

If Ernaux, Huston and Arcan provide nuanced alternatives to dominant sexual discourses (simultaneously incorporating and challenging hegemonic tropes), their representation of women's sexuality is no exception. Their works operate at the intersection of biological determinism and social constructionism, and present us with often contradictory images of female sexual identity, development and experience. I will here explore how these authors critique essentialist and constructionist theories of sexual difference, and exploit both radical and reactionary tropes of femininity to produce a counter-narrative, thus problematising essentialism within a framework of sexual difference.

This measured perspective on sexual difference is crucial given the historical conflict between social constructionists on the one hand, and sexual essentialists on the other. There is arguably a need to reconcile essentialist theories of sexual difference with more relative theories of sex and gender as socially constructed (as Denise Riley and Haraway have strongly emphasised),<sup>158</sup> to acknowledge social influences over female identity even while reinstating the female body as a fundamental component of sexual discursive practise. One possible solution is *écriture féminine* famously conceptualised by Cixous: a mode of writing reserved not for women alone, but nonetheless defined in relation to a female libido and subjectivity.<sup>159</sup> Written discourse has historically been colonised by men at the expense of women's freedom of expression, whilst *écriture féminine* has been celebrated as a way of writing conducive to translating female rather than male experience. What, then, do we mean by this particularly feminine way of writing? Mary Jacobus explains that it is difficult to come to a resolution in women's writing (a term inclusive of *écriture féminine* in Jacobus' case) congruent with a feminist agenda, since women writers are either compelled to refuse a stereotypically female mode of writing and feminine attributes (such as favouring sense over sensibility), or

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<sup>158</sup> Denise Riley, 'Am I that Name?': *Feminism and the Category of 'Women in History'* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p. 98.

Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association of Books, 1991), p. 181.

<sup>159</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la méduse et autres ironies* (Paris : Galilée, 2010), p. 55.

to recycle a male-dominated literary form and conservative stereotypes about feminine identity.<sup>160</sup> In the end, Jacobus offers the following solution:

The rediscovery of a female literary tradition need not mean a return to specifically 'female' (that is, potentially confining) domains [...]. Rather, they involve a recognition that all attempts to inscribe female difference within writing are a matter of inscribing women within fictions of one kind or another (whether literary, critical, or psychoanalytic); and hence, that what is at stake for both women writing and writing about women is the rewriting of these fictions – the work of revision which makes 'the difference of view' a question rather than an answer, and a question to be asked not simply of women, but of writing too.<sup>161</sup>

I will explore how Ernaux, Huston and Arcan rewrite rather than reject fictions (and perceived truths in the case of Huston) about women, to challenge those fictions and others in the process; fiction being understood in the same broad way as Jacobus. My focus will be on fictions pertaining to female sexual identity, experience and development, in short, to female sexuality, and on how sexual difference can paradoxically serve as a buttress to the patriarchy or as an apparatus of female sexual emancipation.

I will turn to a much wider selection of texts than in chapter one. Such a quantity will be necessary to draw attention to the variety of the studied authors' portrayals of sexuality. I will explore the evolving relationship between class and sex in Ernaux's work, my analysis ranging from Ernaux's earlier autofictional and autobiographical corpus (*Les Armoires vides*, *La Femme gelée* and *L'Évènement*) to her more recent erotic triad (*Passion simple*, *Se perdre* and *L'Occupation*). I will then compare Huston's infamously determinist essay *Reflets dans un œil d'homme* to a collection of her less controversial theory (namely *Carnets de l'incarnation*) and her fictional prose (*L'Empreinte de l'ange* and *Une Adoration*). I will end this chapter by exploring Arcan's first and final autobiographies, *Putain* and her posthumous collection *Burqa de chair*.

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<sup>160</sup> Mary Jacobus, 'The Difference of View', in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 10-21 (p. 14).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

## 2.1 Class and Sexual (R)evolution: From *Les Armoires vides*, *La Femme gelée* and *L'Évènement*, to Ernaux's Erotic Triptych

Ernaux asserted in an interview with Géraud Manhes that she has devoted little attention to the issue of sexual difference, despite its growing currency in France. She specified that she is not averse to the notion of innate sexual difference, but prefers to focus on social constructionism.<sup>162</sup> For her, it is crucial that we recognise the influence of social factors on female and male identity formation and, above all, the ways in which class, sex and gender intersect (chapter three). Day goes so far as to argue that class comes prior to gender in the shaping of Ernaux's identity as a girl and woman.<sup>163</sup> This is in alignment with the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, who believes class expresses itself *through* sexual difference, so that men and women experience man- and womanhood differently according to which class they belong to.<sup>164</sup> I will build on this reading of Ernaux's work by applying another of Bourdieu's theses: that we experience sexual and gender difference as a natural phenomenon, albeit socially informed.<sup>165</sup> In *La Domination masculine* Bourdieu argues that, though we may recognise the socially constructed nature of sexual difference, we embody social norms and they therefore feel natural. This is suitably summarised by Ernaux herself in *L'Écriture comme un couteau*. On the one hand, she is reluctant to claim the term *écriture féminine* since 'c'est de facto faire de la différence sexuelle – et seulement pour les femmes' and thus side-lines women (chapter four).<sup>166</sup> On the other, she explains that one is irrefutably shaped by one's history and defines hers as 'Mon histoire de femme'.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Géraud Manhes, 'Annie Ernaux, Les Années', *Bibliothèque de Lyon*, 23 November 2010.

<sup>163</sup> Loraine Day, 'Class, Sexuality and Subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*', in *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Margaret Atack and Phil Powrie (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990), pp. 41-55 (p. 46).

<sup>164</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Domination masculine* (Paris : Seuil, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-11 and 110.

<sup>166</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*, with postscript by Annie Ernaux (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), p. 90.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Ernaux's views here echo those of the French feminist *Groupe de Recherche et d'Information Féministe*. In the words of Monique Rémy, they recognised that 'Si les femmes doivent refuser l'inégalité généralisée qui est leur lot, elles ne peuvent abandonner des qualités intrinsèques acquises par leur histoire.' Monique Rémy, *Histoire des mouvements de femmes. De l'utopie à l'intégration* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1990), p. 69.

I will begin by exploring how the heroines and mothers in autofictional novels *Les Armoires vides* (1974) and *La Femme gelée* (1981) struggle to meet social standards of femininity; standards which may stem from and/or reify their working-class roots. I will examine, in particular, how sexual curiosity and promiscuity represent tricky terrain for working-class women: a means of class transition from one perspective, and a route to class shame from another. In the end, I will indicate that the narratives reject oppressive ideals of womanhood, shown to be a hindrance to women of all classes. In my reading of her autobiography *L'Évènement* (2000), where Ernaux has an insight into two worlds as a university student of working-class origins, I will suggest that stereotypes about female sexuality and morality are contested as inextricably linked to class. Women of a higher social strata are judged more favourably as a matter of course, even in the most compromising of contexts. I will then analyse Ernaux's erotic triad produced decades later, when Ernaux has firmly established herself as a successful writer.<sup>168</sup> In these autobiographical works – *Passion simple* (1991), *Se perdre* (2001) and *L'Occupation* (2002) – a testimony of shame is replaced with a desire to shock. If, as Bacholle-Bošković affirms, 'le monde dominé' can be rehabilitated by 'l'affirmation du corps',<sup>169</sup> I will argue that bodily and sexual affirmation occur more easily the more Ernaux rehabilitates her memories as a member of 'le monde dominé'.<sup>170</sup>

I will thus demonstrate how femininity acts as a marker of Ernaux's journey away from class and sexual shame, adding to Day's extensive study on this subject (*Writing Shame and Desire*) a heightened focus on sexual difference and class (r)evolution.<sup>171</sup> More specifically, I will thus extend Edwards's approach to reading

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<sup>168</sup> Even more so now: 'Having occupied an "outsider" position in relation to French feminisms and dominant culture as a whole because of her class background, Ernaux now writes with the authority of celebrity and literary consecration.' [Forthcoming] Lyn Thomas, 'Voix blanche? Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms and the Challenge of Intersectionality', in *Making Waves*, ed. by Margaret Attack and others (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2019), pp. 205-223 (p. 222).

<sup>169</sup> Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, 'Confessions d'une femme pudique. Annie Ernaux', *French Forum*, 28.1 (2003), 91-109 (p. 92).

<sup>170</sup> Dierdre Doran Russell underlines the fact that 'she habitually uses his [Bourdieu's] terms "dominés" and "dominants" to describe class structures.' Dierdre Doran Russell, 'Narrative Identities in Contemporary French Autobiographical Literature and Film' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2008), p. 122.

<sup>171</sup> Loraine Day, *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007)

*Passion simple* – tracking how Ernaux ‘navigate[s] the spectrum of shameful to shameless’ – by applying it to Ernaux’s whole erotic triad, and a number of earlier works.<sup>172</sup> I hope to make clear, moreover, that Ernaux is not so much interested in negating the instinctiveness of feminine behaviour (as ever, the material, primal aspect of sex is of prime importance to Ernaux [chapters one and four]), but in reconceptualising certain stereotypes of femininity as entities to be enjoyed rather than feared.

### **Domestic Goddesses and Sexual Promiscuity**

*Les Armoires vides* is the first of Ernaux’s works to be published and takes the form of a fictional bildungsroman, recounting the story of Denise Lesur: an autofictional reconstitution of Ernaux herself as with *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* (chapter one). In *Les Armoires vides*, Ernaux writes about Denise’s revolt against her working-class milieu, as she strives to distance herself from her family roots through education,<sup>173</sup> cultural accomplishments (166) and sexual development (153-154). Denise’s attempts to break away from her working-class background thus also work in conjunction with the appropriation of a distinct type of femininity. The novel establishes that Denise’s friends are more privileged than her (86) and that their mothers are deeply committed to their domestic duties. In Denise’s family, it is her father who cleans, cooks and spends the most time with his daughter (25), whilst her mother often fails to fulfil the usual tasks expected of women. Denise thus associates her mother’s *soi-disant* masculine persona with a working-class status, leading her to resent her parents in spite of herself (99). In addition, she claims to be different to other girls owing to her moral impurity, when she states that ‘personne d’autre ne glissait le doigt dans le quat’sous, personne ne le regardait dans une glace, personne ne rêvait de faire pipi à plusieurs. Toute seule.’ (65) The same is true of Ernaux in *La Femme gelée* (let us call her Anne to fit the autofictional form), who urinates

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<sup>172</sup> Nathalie Edwards, ‘“Ecrire pour ne plus avoir honte”: Christine Angot’s and Annie Ernaux’s Shameless Bodies’, in *The Female Face of Shame*, ed. by Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013), pp. 61-73 (p. 63).

<sup>173</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Les Armoires vides* (Paris : Gallimard, 2002), p. 129. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

standing up in her garden<sup>174</sup> and feels like a ‘coureuse’ compared to other (middle-class) female students (100). Despite her best efforts, Anne always fails to meet the demands of men and women of a higher class. She is never sufficiently docile (104), and her attempts at being a cook, cleaner, wife and mother are always inadequate (176). Denise and Anne are thus differentiated from other girls owing to their (and Denise’s mother’s) inability to subscribe to fixed models of femininity, and class is evidently closely affiliated with sexual conditioning. It is also clear that gender and sexual difference are keenly felt by Denise and Anne in symbiosis with their class angst.

Yet Denise’s sexual freedom also enables her to escape from her familial milieu, even more than her studies (‘Mes parents étaient dans les choux, mes études elles-mêmes avaient perdu leur sens’ [139]). Denise claims she would rather be a ‘putain’ or one of the ‘filles perdues’ because ‘Au moins, elles en étaient sorties, de leur trou.’ (107) The *double entendre* created by the word ‘trou’ consolidates the idea that these girls managed to escape their social situation as repressed women through their sexual promiscuity. Anne’s sexual liaisons with men of a higher class-status enable her to conceive of herself as their equals or, in fact, their superior, saying at one point ‘je voyais que les bien-élevés, c’était du bidon ; je commence à me sentir supérieure à lui’ (143), and it is evident that Denise distinguishes herself from the ‘traînées’ whom her mother condemns (143), by identifying sexual freedom not with shame but rather with ‘L’orgueil, [de] se croire différente’ (144). As Thomas argues, Denise’s relationships with middle-class boys purifies her sexual desire to some degree,<sup>175</sup> helping her to transcend her class-status contrary to the ‘traînées’ in her neighbourhood. Until, that is, her parents find out and punish her for behaving “‘comme les filles du quartier qui fréquentent à quinze ans !’” (145-146). Sexually promiscuous women are therefore divided into two categories: those who transcend their class milieu and feminine oppression (their ‘trou’), and those whose promiscuity reinforces their lower-class position and female subordination. On the

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<sup>174</sup> Annie Ernaux, *La Femme gelée* (Paris : Gallimard, 1981), p. 12. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>175</sup> Lyn Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 66.



one hand, it grants Denise a status of superiority when faced with male partners of a higher class, and on the other, it relegates her and others to the level of the 'traînée'.

The correlation between intellectual spheres, bourgeois culture and Denise's sexual initiation is an equally slippery one. Her immersion into university life entails an introduction to intellectual men: 'ces garçons noyés dans leurs bouquins, hautains, polards, fac de droit, philosophes...' (166). If higher education presented itself as a means of accessing a world beyond that of her parents (129), however, her sexual encounters with men of this sphere at this stage of her life do not allow her the same class-shift. Denise allows a man to take her virginity based mostly on what she esteems to be his superior education, wealth and background (170), her sexual autonomy thus determined less by gendered hierarchies than by class relations. It is questionable, moreover, as to whether Denise ever truly wants to transcend her working-class status or the model of femininity which her mother represents, as is clear when she meets her boyfriend's mother: 'Tout ce que j'avais imaginé, elle l'a, c'est irréal à force, le collier de perles, la blondeur discrète, la douceur, les friselis d'oiseau, les mots tendres à son fils. La mère que j'aurais voulu avoir. Et je la déteste au fond.' (176) The feminine, bourgeois figure she had always aspired to fails to match up to her expectations, once her dreams are confronted with the insipid reality.

The ideal bourgeois mother reappears in *La Femme gelée* in which Anne fictionally recounts her experiences as a wife and mother, endeavouring to conform to the normative conventions of femininity and motherhood of which her mother-in-law is the perfect emblem. Where the ideal mother in *Les Armoires vides* is the antithesis of Denise's mother, the unnamed 'frozen woman' in *La Femme gelée* is the antithesis of her husband's. Neither Anne nor her mother subscribe to the common conventions of feminine identity, and it is therefore clear that, despite Anne's class ascendance through her literary studies and teaching aspirations (12), she fails to make the step to a "higher" category of woman. *Les Armoires vides* and *La Femme gelée* also follow similar structures: both are split into two sections, beginning with the protagonist's illusions, before recounting her disillusionment. In the former, the protagonist's illusions are about attaining a class status and a type of femininity superior to those of her mother, whereas the heroine in the latter wrongly assumes that 'il est glorieux d'être une femme, même, que les femmes sont supérieures aux hommes' based on her mother's persona (15-16). In both cases, the narrative voice comes to the realisation that a middle-class, domestic femininity is

less desirable than the *paysan* model of Ernaux's mother, and where *Les Armoires vides* begins by critiquing her mother and ends by condemning 'la mère que j'aurais voulu avoir' (176), *La Femme gelée* begins by speaking of her mother in elegiac terms and ends by condemning her mother-in-law and herself, in keeping with Thomas' view that middle-class values reveal themselves to be more oppressive than working-class ones in these two works.<sup>176</sup>

### **All in the Same Boat**

Some aspects of gendered ideologies, however, affect girls and women of any social ilk. Anne's friend Guillaume, for one, concludes that there are only two types of women: those who have sex and those who do not (114). Indeed, the social pressures on women to have sex, marry and have children affect all women in *La Femme gelée*. All women are expected to marry young, and Anne's parents feel obliged to explain to friends that she must study before marriage, and thus to make excuses for what the narrative voice terms 'un comportement bizarre' (117). Men, on the other hand, are persuaded to stay free for as long as possible (121). Once married, moreover, it is understood that women should undertake the majority of childcare whilst men should be entitled to enjoy themselves (174), and that only single women should be free to seek further education. Anne initially coheres to these clichés of femininity. Where she previously venerated Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* for its rhetoric against marriage (103), she later mocks its references to slavery and claims she and her husband shared their domestic responsibilities in equal measure (129). She refuses to love childcare, however, saying 'Si je commençais à aimer, je serais perdue' (143) (it will be useful to maintain this aversion to domestic duties in mind when we come to our analysis of Ernaux's erotic triptych).

In the closing passage of this novel, Anne indicates that she grew used to the banal order of her life: 'moulin à café, casseroles, prof discrète, femme de cadre vêtue Cacharel ou Rodier au-dehors. Une femme gelée', hence the title (181-182). She speaks of women at the hairdresser's in markedly derogatory terms, as the face of her own future:

Je vais bientôt ressembler à ces têtes marquées, pathétiques, qui me font horreur au salon de coiffure, quand je les vois renversées, avec leurs yeux

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

clos, dans le bac à shampoing. [...] Au bord des rides qu'on ne peut plus cacher, des affaissements.

Déjà moi ce visage. (182)

She says that, in the end, she will resemble these other (frozen) women. Norms of womanhood thus affect women of all classes, and the end of this autobiography signifies Anne's break away from the figure of her mother towards the feminine ideal: *la femme gelée*. This figure is akin to that of a doll (chapter one), given the lack of individual identity and resemblance between each head, with their hair and faces frozen, fixed like china (their icy finish infers their fragility and an implicit desire to shatter the surface of their calm exterior). The overlap between present and future ('Déjà moi ce visage'), and the bleak tone of this passage alludes to Anne's fear when faced with her future self. It is still questionable, therefore, as to whether class always intersects with sexual inequality in this text. Does Anne's turn away from her mother signify a break away from her working-class origins, as it did for Denise in *Les Armoires vides*, or simply a step towards the passive model of femininity that her mother had always eschewed?

### **Supermarket Sluts**

There is less ambiguity in Ernaux's later autobiography *L'Évènement*, where Ernaux narrates her illicit abortion administered in 1958. Ernaux claims that, despite her attempts to transcend her origins through her studies and cultural milieu, 'ce qui poussait en moi c'était, d'une certaine manière, l'échec social.'<sup>177</sup> The term 'ce qui' dehumanises and depersonalises the foetus, and makes it stand in as a symbolic marker of social *déchéance* as opposed to a sign of generation or hope. As McIlvanney comments, her pregnancy reflects the victory of the working-class and corporeal, over her bourgeois and intellectual status.<sup>178</sup> The title is reflective of Ernaux's fall from grace, Ernaux iterating the 'innommable'<sup>179</sup> via euphemisms.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'Évènement* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), p. 32. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>178</sup> Siobhan McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return of Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>179</sup> Bacholle-Bošković, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>180</sup> Havercroft explains that euphemisms allow for the body to be 'avoided' in this work (chapter one). Barbara Havercroft, 'Subjectivité féminine et conscience féministe dans

Even left-wing liberals fail to support people in her position (38). The key example given is that of her friend Jean. He fights for freedom of contraception and family planning (34) yet upon learning about her situation attempts to seduce her in his kitchen in his wife's absence (35). Ernaux explains that he expected her to acquiesce, since she had shifted from one category of women to another in his eyes (34 and 36). This is a reiteration of Guillaume's view in *La Femme gelée* that there are two types of women, 'les relaxes et les culs-bénits, les unes couchant, les autres non.' (114)

In this autobiographical work however, the Madonna-whore complex is intimately informed by class positions. In this regard, women are certainly not in the same boat. When Ernaux finally succeeds in aborting her foetus, the 'interne' who comes to check on her scolds her and takes money from her whilst she lies helpless in her bed. When she asks to be taken to a clinic, moreover, he refuses and claims she must go to a hospital (104). Later at 'l'Hôtel-Dieu' (111) the nurses and doctor are surprised to hear of her being a literature student, and are embarrassed for having treated her with disdain. As Ernaux explains:

J'ai cru qu'il avait honte de m'avoir maltraitée dans la salle d'opération. J'étais embarrassée pour lui. Je me trompais. Il avait seulement honte d'avoir – parce qu'il ne savait rien de moi – traité une étudiante de la fac de lettres comme une ouvrière du textile ou une vendeuse de Monoprix [...]. (110)

The nurse then informs Ernaux that she is better off without the baby. These consoling words originate not from female complicity, but from a sense of class superiority ('moins peut-être à une complicité de femmes, qu'à une acceptation par les "petites gens" du droit des "hauts-placés" à se mettre au-dessus des lois.' [111]) There is thus a clear intimation that the legal, medical and social perception of women's bodies, and moral discourse on sexuality, are intimately informed by class difference. Indeed, Ernaux states that the woman giving birth next to her, a single, working class woman, was judged more harshly than Ernaux (106). Middle-class status thus supplies women with a heightened, if relative, sense of entitlement: their actions are by default considered more respectable than those of working-class women.

This overlaying of class and gender hierarchies continues until the end, when Ernaux tells her left-wing but middle-class friend Jacques S. about her abortion to teach him a lesson ('C'était peut-être par haine de sa classe, pour défier ce fils de directeur d'usine, parlant des ouvriers comme d'un autre monde, ou par orgueil.' [121]) This autobiographical text therefore serves as a means for Ernaux to embrace her working-class status and her abortion in such a way that she exchanges shame for assertiveness, braving the reader as she does Jacques. As Day suggests, sexual experience constitutes a sign of class defiance in Ernaux's work.<sup>181</sup> She utilises her past sexual experience and emblematic position as the "ruined woman" to critique unequal narratives around sex, in keeping with Havercroft's view that Ernaux unmasks the artificiality of stereotypes which have also intimately contributed to her sense of identity.<sup>182</sup> In narrating her memories of shame, therefore, she attests to a whole schema of oppression. She chooses not to name the shamed junior doctor for instance because, as she says, she wants him to stand in for general practice (112). There is an ongoing tension between individual narrative and collective History throughout Ernaux's works which, in her own words, grants her narrative 'je' a 'forme transpersonnelle' (chapters three and four).<sup>183</sup>

For Havercroft and Fabrice Thumerel, this means that Ernaux's own individuality is dissolved within her narratives. Havercroft argues that Ernaux must become other to herself to recount the experience of abortion<sup>184</sup> or, as Thumerel proposes, it is by situating herself as object of analysis in *L'Évènement* (and *La Honte*) that Ernaux comes to 'de-subjectivise' her shame; to create a necessary critical distance to writing about it.<sup>185</sup> I would add that Ernaux's subjective experience nevertheless remains of primordial importance in this work (chapter four). After all, Ernaux claims not to care about the ideas or judgements of the people she tells about her experiences in this text, such as O – a Catholic bourgeois friend of hers who supports her up until the end:

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<sup>181</sup> Day, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>182</sup> Havercroft, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

Annie Ernaux, 'Vers un je transpersonnel', *Cahiers RITM : Autofictions et cie*, 6 (1993), 219-222 (p. 221).

<sup>184</sup> Havercroft, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>185</sup> Fabrice Thumerel, 'Avant-propos', in *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, pp. 11-36 (p. 25).

Je constate ceci : le désir qui me poussait à dire ma situation ne tenait compte ni des idées ni des jugements possibles de ceux à qui je me confiais. Dans l'impuissance dans laquelle je me trouvais, c'était un acte, dont les conséquences m'étaient indifférentes, par lequel j'essayais d'entraîner l'interlocuteur dans la vision effarée du réel. (62)

Though other people may relate to the scenes in this text – hence the successful *je transpersonnel* of Ernaux's works – Ernaux's central position as the subject of these scenes is key in preserving 'la vision effarée du réel', of confronting the reader with her personal experience of abortion and sexual development. Subsequently, I would argue that Ernaux refuses to de-subjectivise her experiences as Thumerel suggests (perhaps 'inter-subjectivise' would be a more congruous term). Aside from her *journaux extimes* (chapter three) and *réfléchis* (chapter four), Ernaux's texts always take as their point of departure her own memories, enabling her to work through personal class and sexual shame.

### **Change in Class and Critical Stance**

This is what allows for the said shift in stance from shame to defiance; partly, I believe, because Ernaux has succeeded in becoming a woman of letters. After all, it is only because of her position as a student in *L'Evènement* that the doctor changes his tune, and Ernaux exploits her interstitial social position to compare people's perceptions of working-class and intellectual women, thereby testifying to class-based misogyny. During the period in which her erotic triad is set moreover, over three decades later, we are left in no doubt as to the heights Ernaux has reached:

quand j'entends cela, ces appréciations élogieuses, impression qu'il s'agit d'une autre femme, plus talentueuse, plus tout, que moi : une sorte d'idéal, la voix que j'entendais à Lillebonne, depuis la fenêtre de la chambre,<sup>186</sup> dont je ne savais pas que c'était l'écho de la mienne. Et moi je me traîne au-dessous de cette voix, de cette femme qui n'existe pas, une image à laquelle j'ai aspiré et que je n'atteindrai jamais.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> I presume this to be her bedroom window as a child.

<sup>187</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Se perdre* (Paris : Gallimard, 2003), p. 352. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

Ernaux perceives her success from the perspective of her younger self, ever the girl from Lillebonne aspiring to greater things. The term ‘au-dessous’ alludes to the “‘haut-placés” in *L’Evènement*, a reminder that she has not forgotten her roots despite her rise to fame, or her previous vilification as a member of the working-class. In *Passion simple*, *Se perdre* and *L’Occupation*, Ernaux makes the most of this prestigious position. She stresses her role as a writer – and hence her elite status within the French literary circle – to embrace many of the sexual characteristics which caused Denise and Anne such anxiety in *Les Armoires vides* and *La Femme gelée*, and to debunk myths this time about middle-class women.

### **The Erotic Triad**

Ernaux’s erotic triad spans a period of eleven years (*Passion simple*<sup>188</sup> published nine years prior to *L’Evènement*, and *Se perdre* and *L’Occupation* a year and two years later respectively), yet the similarities between them are stark (especially *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*, the latter being a diary version of the former). Each of them focuses on Ernaux’s obsession with a man, which leads her to consciously objectify herself and submit to her lover’s whims. All of these works follow an anti-romantic form, in narrating a story between a woman and her lover which is always fated to end from the very beginning, similarly to Huston’s *L’Empreinte de l’ange* and *Une Adoration*, all four works refusing to cohere to the happy-ending Jones considers central to the romantic form.<sup>189</sup> Unlike the antithetical Romeo and Juliet romantic structure, moreover, where a love story is tragically fated to end with the death of two ‘star-crossed lovers’, Ernaux’s relationships end in a banal petering out of the liaison. Ernaux goes so far as to claim that this anti-romantic form is central to all her relationships (*Se perdre* 77-78). In addition, each of her lovers is referred to only by a letter, her lover in *Passion simple* being A, S in *Se perdre*, and W in

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<sup>188</sup> This work of Ernaux’s, above all others, marks a shift towards a more radical register (chapter four). Isabelle Charpentier, ‘De corps à corps. Réceptions croisées d’Annie Ernaux’, *Politix*, 7.27 (1994), 45-75 (p. 53). So extreme was the reception of this publication moreover, dividing opinion, that an article in *L’Evenement du Jeudi* (‘Une passion qui sépare la critique’) and television programme (‘Masque et la plume’, *France-inter*) laid out views for and against. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>189</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Mills & Boon Meets Feminism’, in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. by Jean Radford (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 195-220 (p. 214).

*L'Occupation* (not for nothing does Philippe Vilain name her A. in *L'Etreinte*).<sup>190</sup> Further, her lovers in *Passion simple* and *Se perdre* are Russian, and they are in a relationship with another woman in every one of these works. In addition, she takes HIV/AIDs tests during her affairs with all three of them (*Se perdre* 312).<sup>191</sup> The male protagonists are thus reduced to a handful of common denominators.

### **Desacrilising the Bourgeois Madonna**

These reductions are very unlike the intersectional portraits of men and women to be examined in chapter three and, indeed, of herself within this erotic triad. A member of the Francophone literary elite, Ernaux undermines the conceptualisation of the older, intellectual, bourgeois woman as morally pure, through a risqué self-portrait. She comes to embody the morally abhorrent figure of the other woman, going as far as to meet her lover's wife in person in *Se perdre* (46), and aiming not to seek her forgiveness but to be the more beautiful of the two. Her lover in *Se perdre* is also morally questionable, being anti-Semitic (57). Ernaux is also keen to forge a piece of writing borne out of the site of sexual action itself, claiming she wants to keep her bed in disarray as a portrait: 'J'aurais voulu conserver tel quel ce désordre où tout objet signifiait un geste, un moment, qui composait un tableau dont la force et la douleur ne seront jamais atteintes pour moi par aucun autre dans un musée.' (*Passion* 20) It is interesting that this idea of Ernaux's should have preceded Tracey Emin's artwork 'My Bed', shortlisted for the Turner Prize, which operated as a 'tableau' of disarray all of its own at the Tate Gallery London in 1999.<sup>192</sup> This begs the question as to whether this piece encapsulates 'la force et la douleur' of the moment desired by Ernaux, whether Emin achieves in archived fine art what Ernaux hoped to do in writing. One thing is certain: that Ernaux exploits her ascension to the intellectual,

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<sup>190</sup> In which he writes about their relationship, focussing on sexual experience (including sperm and stains, like Ernaux), and referring to his childhood memories of his parents. See Philippe Vilain, *L'Etreinte* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>191</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Passion simple* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997), p. 54. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

Annie Ernaux, *L'Occupation* (Paris : Gallimard, 2002), p. 69. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>192</sup> Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998, installation.



bourgeois milieu of the writer to subvert expectations and to glorify the seemingly banal, just as Emin did seven years later.

Ernaux's preoccupation with glorifying the banal is in keeping with her desire to preserve material traces of the everyday, particularly when it comes to sexual materiality (chapter one). Like Emin's bed and carpet that is littered with used tissues and condoms, Ernaux preserves her lover's semen in *Passion simple*: 'Naturellement, je ne me lavais pas avant le lendemain pour garder son sperme.' (20) The word 'Naturellement' makes us contradictorily query the naturalness of such an action, and reminds us of the importance of material memory in Ernaux's corpus. This material way of writing allows Ernaux to distance herself from male erotica and to align herself with an *écriture féminine* as a mode of writing that requires corporeal engagement, drawing on what Chawaf deemed the creative potential of bodily secretions.<sup>193</sup> It is also possible that the term 'Naturellement', moreover, is used by Ernaux here as a means of daring the reader to question her motives and contradict her. We are very far away from the shame apparent in her earlier works. Furthermore, bodily waste of this kind is defined by Kristeva as a primary example of the abject, because it breaks the boundary of the body.<sup>194</sup> Where Ernaux sublimated her abject-status as a working-class woman in *L'Évènement*, I would argue that as an older woman accepted into the intellectual and middle class echelons of society, she allows herself to be contaminated by the abject instead (going as far as to preserve it as a precious element) (86).<sup>195</sup> In using her social status in this way, Ernaux subverts expectations about the sexual identity of older, intellectual and bourgeois women. This is the opposite to the structural function of the moneyshot (refigured by Ernaux herself in the opening pages of *Passion simple* [11-12]), which reinscribes female submission and male domination within pornography. If Ernaux

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<sup>193</sup> Chantal Chawaf, 'Linguistic Flesh', trans. by Yvonne Rochette-Ozzello, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. and intro. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), pp. 177-178 (p. 178).

Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>194</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur : Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris : Seuil, 1980), pp. 88-89.

<sup>195</sup> There is some critical dispute as to whether or not semen is an abject entity (see Keith Reader, *The Abject Object: Avatars of the Phallus in Contemporary French Theory, Literature and Film* [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006], p. 44). Here I argue that in Ernaux's work it is represented as such, contributing to her manipulation of abject entities to sexualise her older self and sublimate her earlier abject condition.

seeks to recreate in writing a 'suspension du jugement moral' (12) as the money-shot does, she uses her erotic writing and the symbolic value of semen to subvert moral judgements *and* common assumptions pertaining to class, gender and sexual activity.

It is with more than a little irony, therefore, that she concedes to a multitude of erotic and romantic clichés. She wears nice clothes, and enjoys her lover driving fast with his hand on her thigh (*Se perdre* 34 and 294-295). As for the sexual imagery, Ernaux recuperates tropes from the erotic market (chapter one), stating that she and her lover S in *Se perdre* have explored all the Karma Sutra (57-58). Ernaux also claims that S seemed to guess exactly what she wanted sexually-speaking, and she wonders whether he was inspired by erotic film or books (57-58), implying that women are just as keen on clichéd erotic practice as men are thought to be. Ernaux also includes a variety of taboos within her erotic triad. In *Se perdre*, for instance, Ernaux compares S's semi-erection to Jesus's crucifixion ('Adoration de son sexe. Je pense aux peintures du Christ nu, décollé de la croix, quand il est à demi soulevé' [43]). She also states in *L'Occupation* that prayer and masturbation serve the same purpose, in terms of achieving 'la grâce ou l'apaisement' (67), and she compares an HIV/AIDS test to confession, both being a means of purification (69). The intended shock-value of this transgression was successful, Ernaux's erotic triptych meeting with a highly critical reception particularly from men (chapter four), owing to what Day calls Ernaux's self-confessed 'defiance of cultural norms that code feminine sexuality as romantic, emotional and intent on the pursuit of long-term commitment.'<sup>196</sup> Ernaux's transgressive mode of erotic writing thus enables her to disrupt expectations when it comes to bourgeois, intellectual and/or older women, and in terms of women's writing.

### **Deconstructing Class and Sexual Dualisms**

Transgressive imagery such as that discussed above is also deployed by Ernaux to critique the feminine condition more widely (her 'histoire de femmes'). Ernaux exploits the theme of passion central to the erotic form to delegitimise essentialist theories of sexual difference. Whilst she felt obliged in the past to conform to social expectations as wife and mother, she now gives in to 'the essential' as she had in her teens after 'doing her bit' for society: 'il me semblait qu'ayant traversé le temps des

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<sup>196</sup> Day, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

études et du travail acharné, du mariage et de la reproduction, payé en somme mon tribut à la société, je me vouais enfin à l'essentiel, perdu de vue depuis l'adolescence.' (*L'Occupation* 52). For her, life's hypostasis is (mostly sexual) passion between two people, but marriage, children and increased female labour are decidedly optional.

At times though, Ernaux plainly embraces those stereotypically female roles so loathed by Denise and Anne. In *Se perdre*, Ernaux willingly takes on domestic duties and cleans to welcome her 'male' as she terms him (67):

Je vais laver le sol, les chiottes, faire un peu de propreté pour l'accueillir, le 'mâle', l'homme, celui que je reconnais comme un dieu quelque temps, avant la désillusion, l'oubli. (67)

The terms 'désillusion' and 'oubli' intimate that women are not always in love with one man, nor forever subservient. As such, Ernaux can enjoy these chores because they are not an interminable obligation,<sup>197</sup> the sardonic reference to her "male" reflecting Ernaux's now playful attitude to hearth and home. Ernaux rejects the idea of settling down at all, as is clear in *L'Occupation*:

C'est pourtant moi qui avais quitté W. quelques mois auparavant, après une relation de six ans. Autant par lassitude que par incapacité à échanger ma liberté, regagnée après dix-huit ans de mariage, pour une vie commune qu'il désirait ardemment depuis le début. (13)

Far from envisaging a monogamous life with a man then, Ernaux's domestic duties only go as far as to appeal to the partner or husband of another woman. Ernaux thus plays on clichés of femininity in such a way as to overturn other stereotypes, and to consolidate her position as a sexually free woman as well as a writer (*Se perdre* 26). Where Ernaux's characters downplayed or regretted their sexual urges, or renounced their domestic duties in *Les Armoires vides* and *La Femme gelée* for fear of being defined by them, the Ernaux of her later texts emphasises her erotic transgression, her pleasure in conventionally 'feminine' acts and her domestic prowess to distinguish herself from what she implies to be the asexual portrait of the woman writer. Her ascension to the bourgeois milieu of the author thus marks a shift in her

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<sup>197</sup> Similarly to Huston in *Lettres parisiennes*, who says 'je peux prendre plaisir aux activités domestiques parce que je n'y suis pas contrainte.' Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes: Autopsie de l'exil* (Paris : Bernard Barrault, 1986), p. 171.

feminist agenda: from debunking mythologies of sexual difference, to a re-appropriation of these same mythologies to deflect dualistic portrayals of feminine identity. In addition, Ernaux is careful to remain a free woman to avoid being defined by these traits in absolute terms.

In fact, it is impossible to refer to Ernaux as belonging to any one category. Ernaux experiences life as both Madonna and whore, working-class and middle-class woman. In *Se perdre*, for example, when she meets her lover's wife, she explains that she has played the same part in the past as cheated-on wife, and that she too came face-to-face with her husband's mistress ('G') during social events (62). Yet Ernaux also presents herself as whore, particularly in *Se perdre*. Ernaux claims that S's wife is completely opposed to her in terms of size, body shape, hair, eyes and clothes, and that they incarnate the figures of 'la maman et la putain'. (63) In *L'Occupation*, moreover, Ernaux is wary of exchanging sex talk over the telephone with W. for fear of being rebuked, like a whore, by a faithful husband ('il aurait pu me répondre, "merci bien, j'ai ce qu'il me faut à la maison".' [64]). As a lover rather than a wife or partner in her erotic triad, Ernaux always appears to identify with the figure of the whore and to feel in excess, just as Arcan did in *Folle* (chapter one), something which women of a 'purer' calibre, perhaps, could never understand: 'Parole effroyable de N., mercredi soir: "Tu n'aimes pas être dominée, comme toutes les femmes ?" Elle voulait dire, dominée intellectuellement. C'est là le fossé entre les femmes, celles qui trouvent juste cette phrase et les autres.' (357) There is thus an irredeemable gulf between women who have been dominated intellectually, or in more physical and damaging ways. This is reminiscent of the divisions in *L'Evènement* between plumbers and doctors, and between women undergoing abortions and more "respectable" women. This is not to say that intellectual, bourgeois women cannot be sexually subjugated, but that they are not to the same degree socially speaking, and are therefore never to be defined as whore in the same way. Ernaux thus straddles multiple class-based feminine positions to highlight the idiosyncrasies particular to each.

## **Conclusion**

Writing thus enables Ernaux to sublimate shame, that of a young girl for an "unfeminine" mother, of a young adult woman undergoing an abortion, and of an older, intellectual, middle-class figure in the grip of an illicit liaison. Ernaux's

female characters also teach us that sexual shame goes hand in hand with class difference, faithful to Bourdieusian theory, with one's role as a woman judged differently depending on one's social background. Ernaux herself embodies multiple class perspectives, seeing herself as she is perceived by medical professionals in *L'Évènement* as a woman of letters, whilst retaining her working-class indignation, and considering herself as successful author and irrevocably *à l'écart* from the world of the writer. In each of the studied texts, Ernaux makes use of these conflicting class gazes to challenge fixed understandings of feminine identity affecting working- and middle-class women. She lives her vacillating class position as a troublesome one in her earlier works, narrating a deep-seated shame as a girl *de classe ouvrière* in *Les Armoires vides* and *La Femme gelée* and its subsequent sublimation in *L'Évènement*, and as a liberating one in her later erotic triad as a *femme de lettres*, using her manifold status as 'other' in *Passion simple*, *Se perdre* and *L'Occupation* to contravene and problematise fixed categories of being: desacralising the older, middle-class, maternal and intellectual figure, and reflecting on her past self with a renewed respect for the 'fille de Lillebonne'. Ernaux's works thus evolve from class and sex-based binaries and shame, to their fragmentation and sublimation respectively. In the next section, I will explore the ways in which sexual binaries are both kept in place and circumnavigated in Huston's fiction, suggesting a less rigid model of sexual difference to the one she outlines in *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*.

## **2.2 Rethinking *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*: Reparatory Love and Fiction in Huston's *L'Empreinte de l'ange* and *Une Adoration***

Of the three authors studied, Huston is the most renowned for her writings on sexual and gender development owing to the controversy caused by *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*'s publication in 2012. In this critical text, Huston stresses our position as homosapiens to support the view that male and female sexualities are primarily informed by natural instincts, painting a conservative picture of sexual difference: man adopting the role of provider, and woman that of primary caregiver, man depicted as polygamous and woman as stoically monogamous.<sup>198</sup> Unsurprisingly,

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<sup>198</sup> Nancy Huston, *Reflets dans un œil d'homme* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2012), pp. 19-22. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for

this book has become the object of fierce criticism amongst feminist readers.<sup>199</sup> Such views have been deemed, at best, anachronistic, and have been criticised for legitimising female objectification and disempowerment in sex and society (not to mention heteronormative bias). However, in her newly published critical text *Carnets de l'incarnation* (2016), and in *Mosaïque de la pornographie* too to a lesser degree (chapter one), Huston explains that whilst the ways we experience sex are determined by our biological make-up, these tendencies are negatively distorted and exploited by social phenomena, especially the media and pornography. Huston explains that we must recognise this interdependency between biology and sociology before we can understand how to tackle women's sexual oppression (293-294). This will be my first point of discussion, comparing Huston's determinist views in *Reflets* to her more nuanced arguments in the same text and *Carnets*, a collection of poetic, prosaic, philosophical and critical texts produced over thirteen years, inclusive of her introduction to Arcan's *Burqa de chair*, 'Arcan, Philosophe'. I will also examine her understanding of female temporality put forward in her critical essays *Professeurs de désespoir* (2004) and *Journal de la création* (1990). For the second part of this chapter, I will examine how Huston achieves more nuanced portrayals of sexual difference in her novels *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (1988) and *Une Adoration* (2003). I will demonstrate how Huston's fictional stories defy the gender principles demarcated in her non-fiction, aptly illustrating what Derrida deemed literature's right to 'non-censure', 'de tout dire', which 'constitue paradoxalement l'auteur en auteur non responsable devant quiconque, pas même devant soi, de ce que disent et font, par exemple, les personnes ou les personnages de ses œuvres, donc de ce qu'il est censé avoir écrit lui-même.'<sup>200</sup> Literature is answerable to nobody, not even the author, and such is the case with Huston's in which the plots, characters and narrative voices problematise her critical convictions.

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the remainder of this section. This text will be referred to as *Reflets* for the remainder of this section.

<sup>199</sup> Leah Roth and Karin Schwerdtner, 'Interviews (D'Auteures contemporaines)', *Women in French*, 26.2 (2012), 15-30 (p. 18)., and Lori Saint-Martin, 'Ravages de la beauté', *Spirale*, 244 (2013), 65-67 (p. 65).

<sup>200</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Passions* (Paris : Galilée, 1993), pp. 65-66.

### *Reflets dans un œil d'homme*

In *Reflets* Huston adopts a materialist viewpoint, stressing the bearing of hormones and neuro-chemicals on the way we behave, and claiming that a rhetoric of equality in terms of human rights has been wrongly conflated with one of assimilation (80 and 293). Huston privileges anatomical interpretations of sexual difference (19) and draws no distinction between contemporary and primitive man, writing 'notre cerveau reste celui de nos ancêtres de la préhistoire' (21). Huston also indicates that to deny the existence of our biological make-up prevents us from acknowledging and tackling its consequences, since women and men experience life differently owing to biological conditioning (69), and that to deny any innate difference between the sexes is therefore irresponsible (93).

Huston's emphasis on biology is problematic as far as female emancipation is concerned, since she interprets certain aspects of gender inequality as being necessary to human survival. For her, the longevity of human genes relies on male promiscuity, whilst women are paradoxically required to remain monogamous, to provide a stable familial setting for their children, and to thus secure human lineage (22). Huston supports these claims with statistics drawn from *Le Monde* (91) and anecdotes from a collaborative theatre project entitled 'Le Mâle Entendu' to which she contributed (88-90), which suggest men have a higher sex drive than women and a desire for multiple sexual partners.<sup>201</sup> Huston implies that men's natural promiscuity and women's natural *tendance* for monogamy shapes male and female desire to such a degree that 'il n'est pas rare que les garçons feignent d'aimer pour pouvoir baiser, alors que les filles feignent de désirer pour pouvoir piéger.' (23) Though Huston is careful not to term this a universal event, the phrase 'il n'est pas rare' suffices to imply a common, gendered experience of desire and love. Huston argues that this division is confirmed rather than negated within the queer community, since transsexuals have a very firm sense of gendered identity (changing their biological matter accordingly), and since homosexual and lesbian activity are defined respectively by masculine and feminine sexual preferences (79). Huston claims that gay men are commonly polygamous and favour fleeting sexual liaisons and public places which foster them, whilst lesbians avoid such spaces and are

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<sup>201</sup> As reiterated in Nancy Huston, *Carnets de l'Incarnation* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2016), p. 31. This text will be referred to as *Carnets* for the remainder of this chapter.

largely averse to pornography (80-81). Huston's understanding of homosexual relationships thus validates rather than delegitimises her theory of sexual difference. Huston also states that men are genetically coded to be attracted to younger, thinner, healthier women with large breasts and hips, since such attributes infer fertility (26 and 31), supported by the fact that men unwittingly offer ten times more tips to lap dancers during ovulation, whilst women are intuitively attracted to richer more reliable men, since these values constitute contemporary representatives of power and strength (31). Huston's analysis not only affirms sexual difference, then, but arguably endorses the inevitability of gender inequality.

For one thing, Huston claims that it is owing to these traits that men are genetically programmed to perceive women as objects of desire, and that the male gaze is thus built into men's genetic code (9), implying a biological basis to voyeurism – in terms of *what we choose to see* – as well as our basic capacity to see. In turn, women are 'naturally' fated to be objects of the male gaze, hence the title of this work and the opening and closing phrases (9 and 296). Indeed, Huston states that all women are defined by their bodily appearance (9) and conceived of as looked-at objects by men and women alike (185). In addition, Huston suggests that women are naturally predisposed to incite the male gaze by adhering to set tropes of feminine beauty, so that the art of seduction is a feminine domain (84). Huston states that she came to this realisation reading Arcan's *Putain*, which she responded to by exclaiming that: 'c'est vrai ça : les femmes *se font* belles !' (11) There is a further allusion to Arcan's work in the following quotation:

Le féminisme n'a jamais bien su quoi faire de la coquetterie féminine. Le plus souvent, il a préservé l'idée chrétienne d'une différence radicale entre corps et esprit, et la surévaluation de celui-ci par rapport à celui-là. [...] Dans cette optique, la coquetterie était quasiment un « péché ». Fais gaffe, ma fille, disaient les mères féministes tout comme les mères catholiques : quand un garçon te fait la cour, demande-lui toujours : "Tu t'intéresses à moi, ou seulement à mon corps ?"

Comme si le soi pouvait se passer d'un corps ! (11)

As I explained in the previous chapter, Arcan refers to 'la coquetterie féminine' in *A Ciel Ouvert* as being paradoxical on two counts: firstly because women artificially enhance their features to appear naturally beautiful, and secondly because women gradually reveal more of their bodies but progressively less of themselves as they



“really” are. Huston, however, stresses instead the idea that women are impelled to choose between their minds and bodies, between ‘la coquetterie feminine’ and its absolute rejection (11-13).

### **Constructionist Caveats**

For Huston, this dichotomous reading of female identity is all the more specific to our epoch, exacerbated as it is by the birth of photography and feminism in the latter part of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth which produced a more pressing paradox, as she explains in the following quotation: ‘Aucune société humaine, sans doute, ne s’est trouvée empêtrée dans une contradiction aussi inextricable que la nôtre, qui nie tranquillement la différence des sexes tout en l’exacerbant follement à travers les industries de la beauté et de la pornographie.’ (13) Huston thus infers that women must at once deny their femininity by refusing sexual difference as a component of their identity, and be defined by their bodies alone through the pornography and beauty industries. Negating sexual difference is thus not only unhelpful, but hypocritical and short-sighted in failing to see the ongoing objectification of women. Huston states that, ‘on apprend aux fillettes à être jolies sans être gaudicheuses, séduisantes mais non séductrices, désirables mais non désirantes, féminines mais non femelles, en un mot, belles mais pas putes.’ (41) From this perspective, all women are taught to reduce themselves to bodily objects of the male gaze (41). According to Huston, this phenomenon is generated by ‘une véritable explosion pornographique’ (41).

One could argue that Huston encounters a contradiction in terms, in presenting women as naturally predisposed to be objects of the male gaze and desire (21), before charging pornography with the same outcome. Yet Huston suggests that pornography and other media representations of sex exploit a natural occurrence to produce unnatural and potentially dangerous outcomes (286). Huston employs the metaphor of sugar to illustrate this point. In the same way that sugar is a healthy product in its natural form and quantity, but can be damaging if extracted as a raw material and sold in unnaturally large proportions leading to increases in diabetes and obesity levels, so too pornography can distort natural levels of objectification and male sexual dominance and have a subsequently detrimental effect on people’s sexuality (286). Huston employs a similar metaphor in her collection of essays *Carnets*, where she equates ‘*fast-sex* de la pornographie’ and what she terms the

‘prêt-à-jour’ to ‘fast-food’, implying that both are unnatural and unhealthy products of modern society, though they draw their content from natural sources.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, Huston claims that pornography denigrates ‘real’ sex above all else (chapter one).<sup>203</sup>

In short, whilst Huston advocates a return to essentialist readings of gender and sexual difference, she also indicates that these are negatively distorted by social phenomena or wrongly applied to buttress misogynist agendas. Ironically, Huston explains that the problem consists partially in denying a material reality, and in a paradoxical hyper-sexualisation of women. Current solutions as she puts it, consist in ‘dérober vigoureusement le corps féminin à la vue des inconnus, ou brader sa nudité à tous les coins de rue et sur des milliards de sites Internet.’<sup>204</sup> If current solutions to women’s objectification consist in either denying women their bodies or in heedlessly proliferating images of their bodies, they are inadequate and reinstate the Madonna-whore complex to an even greater degree.

### **All You Need is Love**

Regardless of whether one opts for an essentialist or constructionist viewpoint then, women are fated to be divided beings. Biology and contemporary society both condemn women to negotiate between their positions as hyper-sexualised object and desexualised subject. At the Q&A session following her conference ‘Belle Comme une Image’, I was able to ask Huston whether it might be possible for a woman on the one hand to move beyond her object-position, and on the other to consolidate both the object and subject sides of her identity. Huston responded in the negative for the former, but claimed the latter to be possible in a loving, sexual relationship.<sup>205</sup> In other words, woman is not condemned to adopt a passive object position alone in sex, as Huston’s materialist arguments might imply, nor to deny her intuitive, corporeal femininity as Huston claims gender theory promotes, provided she is in a loving sexual relationship.

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<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>205</sup> Nancy Huston, ‘Belle comme une image’, *Wolubilis*, 16 March 2016.

### **Learning from Sexual Difference for the Sake of Women...**

Another solution to gendered and sexed divides of this kind is to see what lessons can be drawn from women's instinctive object position, as opposed to avoiding it. Huston implies, in line with the French feminist tradition, that sexual difference theory can be beneficial in discovering and validating a specifically feminine way of writing (*à la* Cixous, who did not equate *écriture féminine* with anatomical difference)<sup>206</sup> and female sexuality (*à la* Luce Irigaray, who emphasises the specificity of the female sex).<sup>207</sup> Huston has written about a female temporality in *Professeurs de désespoir*, a collection of essays comparing nihilism to idealism in which she claims that 'les hommes et les femmes entretiennent un rapport différent au passage du temps et donc à la mortalité'.<sup>208</sup> According to Huston, this temporal difference is determined by the fact that a woman's body 'lui rappelle la présence possible de l'autre'<sup>209</sup>, owing to menstruation and breasts which infer the possibility of engendering and feeding children.<sup>210</sup> Women are thus attuned to the materiality of their bodies and its connection to life through reproduction, which makes them perceive of time in a different way to men: 'une connaissance intime de la vie matérielle, et cette connaissance lui fait remarquer le passage du temps et les rythmes du corps'.<sup>211</sup> In *Journal de la création* Huston also refers to woman as 'l'horloge impitoyable de l'espèce' and as the reminder of 'la mortalité vivante' of man given that she measures time through her body, with fixed temporal periods for menstruation, pregnancy and fecundity.<sup>212</sup> Huston also explains that women have historically spent more time with children,<sup>213</sup> and thus understand the importance of the other in terms of growth and development (after all, a child cannot survive of its own accord).<sup>214</sup> Women are thus predisposed to think of themselves as both self and

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<sup>206</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>207</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris : Minuit, 1977), pp. 23-24, 28 and 57-58.

Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris : Minuit, 1984), pp. 13-14.

<sup>208</sup> Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Nancy Huston, *Journal de la création* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2001), p. 16.

<sup>213</sup> Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

other, be they in a relationship or not, and to experience their bodily existence more keenly than men. It is for this reason that she claims that '*Le nihilisme est misogynie dans son essence* [author's emphasis]' since it entails the rejection of a material being-in-the-world, to which women are intimately connected.<sup>215</sup> Huston thus exploits the Aristotelean division of the material and spiritual between the sexes (female and male respectively),<sup>216</sup> contrary to traditional feminist initiatives such as those of Mary Wollstonecraft,<sup>217</sup> to convey a difference between male and female temporality.

In addition, Huston's emphasis on menstruation and maternity is an altogether different materiality to the hyper-sexualised model articulated in dominant sexual discourses and in Huston's *Reflets*, where women's sexual materiality relegates them to the position of object and image. From this alternative perspective, the materiality of women's bodies supports rather than negates their subjective identity, as it connects them not only to the potential for giving life, but reminds them of their own material existence and individual lived reality. Stressing women's heightened connection to the material world in this way does not necessarily imply a division between self as mother and whore, moreover, because being defined by one's body can be understood outside of the context of sexual relations. Huston thus enables women to accept their bodies in and for themselves. As Huston says in her collection of essays entitled *Ames et corps*, we must accept our corporeal as well as our mental and spiritual identity.<sup>218</sup>

### **...and Men**

In her non-fictional work, then, Huston accepts the existence of a fundamental difference between the sexes, though she also insists on the value of both masculine and feminine attributes, and on the possibility of the sexes learning from each

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>216</sup> Charlotte Witt, 'Form, Normativity and Gender in Aristotle: A Feminist Perspective,' in *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, ed. by Cynthia A. Freeland (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1998), pp. 118-137 (p. 123).

<sup>217</sup> Jacobus, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>218</sup> Nancy Huston, *Ames et corps: Textes choisis 1981-2003* (Montréal : Leméac, 2009), p. 200.

other.<sup>219</sup> This determinist reading and favourable view of domestic spheres is a testament to Huston's known appreciation for Annie Leclerc,<sup>220</sup> recalling Leclerc's valorisation of domestic and childcare duties in *Parole de femme*.<sup>221</sup> Leclerc explained that these duties had only been considered inferior to roles undertaken by men owing to a false hierarchisation of roles to present men as the superior sex, employing what Françoise Héritier terms 'la valence différentielle des sexes'<sup>222</sup> born out of jealousy for women's ability to give birth to and nurture their offspring. According to Huston, women's sphere should be celebrated, and men and women should learn from one another's differences as opposed to denying them. Huston envisages a utopian outcome from such an exchange:

Il faudrait... que dans la sexualité les gestes se diversifient le plus possible. [...] Que les hommes apprennent les joies de la passivité et les femmes celles de la domination, sans que l'argent change de mains. [...]. Que les hommes s'occupent pleinement de leurs enfants (qu'ils en soient ou non les pères biologiques) [...]. Qu'ils ouvrent aux femmes toutes leurs chasses gardées, que les femmes y apportent du nouveau, et que, dans tous les métiers, elles gagnent autant que les hommes...'<sup>223</sup>

Highlighting sexual difference in this way, according to Huston, can be essential in narrating sexual experience from a feminine perspective, as a creative counter-narrative to the dominant sexual discourses predominantly geared towards male pleasure (chapter one). Huston explains in *Carnets* that the representation of sex in pornography and society more generally takes advantage of intuitive male pleasure drives to meet the demands of a capitalist market, exploiting the male libidinal economy to fund the financial one of the sex industry.<sup>224</sup> Huston suggests that we should turn this pattern on its head, not by negating sexual difference, but by excavating a specifically female sexuality to forge alternative representations of sex

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<sup>219</sup> Nancy Huston, 'Arcan, Philosophe', in Nelly Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, with intro. by Nancy Huston (Paris : Seuil, 2011), pp. 9-32 (p. 29).

<sup>220</sup> Openly espoused throughout her published essay Nancy Huston, *Passions d'Annie Leclerc* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2007).  
Annie Leclerc, *Parole de femme* (Paris : Grasset & Fasquelle, 1974), pp. 17-18, 132 and 137.

<sup>222</sup> Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Feminin I : La Pensée de la différence* (Paris : Odile Jacob, 2012), p. 24.

<sup>223</sup> Huston, 'Arcan, Philosophe', p. 29.

<sup>224</sup> Huston, *Carnets*, pp. 167-168.

to those privileged by the sex industries. In so doing, a masculine model may cease to be the norm of sexual practice and representation. Furthermore, such a mode of writing may benefit men by presenting them with alternative and exciting facets of male sexuality, as opposed to appealing to the same instinctual preferences propagated and exploited by pornography and the media. I will now explore how Huston overcomes Cartesian dualism in her fiction, and how she orientates her narratives towards a feminine rather than a masculine writing and sexuality reflecting and resisting her own essentialist rhetoric.

### **Fiction as Solution and Rebuttal**

I would argue that Huston's sexual scenes in *Une Adoration* and *L'Empreinte de l'ange* succeed in illustrating this resolution through the characterisation of Saffie and Elke, who manage to develop as subjects through their loving relationships with Andrés and Cosmo respectively; relationships in which the women are both objectified and themselves objectify men, and in which both the male and female partners retain their subjectivity. This is an apt corollary to Beauvoir's view that men may perceive of a woman as their equal, deflecting gendered hierarchisation and the notion of the other, in an egalitarian relationship.<sup>225</sup> The sexual praxis and power dynamics in play in both novels, moreover, contradict the essentialist structures defined by Huston in *Reflets*. In both novels Huston presents us with polygamous women as well as men (Elke, Fiona and Saffie), with a refusal to cohere to monolithic definitions of feminine beauty (as with the 'chorus' of women: a collective of female narrative voices who vary in age, size and appearance), with lapses in male desire (Cosmo's erectile dysfunction being a key example), with men capable of non-perfunctory, non-physical sex (Saffie and Andrés; Elke and Cosmo), and with somewhat non-maternal mothers (Elke and Saffie). I will thus explore how Huston utilises literature's capacity 'de tout dire' to create unorthodox sexual scenes in *L'Empreinte de l'ange* and *Une Adoration*, to produce a feminist counter-narrative to what she considers to be both socially constructed and innate sexual norms.

*L'Empreinte de l'ange*, awarded the 'Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*', is set in late-50s France and tells the story of a young German woman named Saffie, who

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<sup>225</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe I : Les Faits et les mythes* (Paris : Gallimard, 1986), pp. 27-28.

moves to Paris and begins to work as a maid for Parisian flutist Raphaël Lepage. Her period of employment proves to be short-lived, as Raphaël is entranced by her youth and listlessness, instantly falls in (unrequited) love with her, secures her hand and fathers her a son named Emil. Unbeknownst to him, Saffie's listlessness is owing to a series of traumatic war-time memories which render her numb to the world around her, and Raphaël's ignorant indifference to her plight renders the marriage dysfunctional and arguably damaging. The omniscient narrative voice guides us through Saffie's transition from post-trauma stasis to partial recovery, and from her oppressive marriage to Raphaël to her emancipatory and therapeutic affair with a Hungarian Jew named András, whom she visits on a regular basis with her young son. The romantic threads are thus mapped onto a carefully constructed historical backdrop which sees Saffie experience a *coup de foudre* with no other than a Communist Jew, a seemingly impossible choice for a woman with German origins whose father was personally implicated in the Nazi extermination of the Jews, and whose mother was raped and impelled to take her own life by the Russian Communists. The novel thus problematises a victim-perpetrator binary. The same is true as far as the romantic plot of the novel is concerned. Saffie is neither vindicated nor criticised for her affair with András, which is presented as an inevitable event, and Raphaël is neither critiqued nor praised for his marriage to Saffie, since whilst he remains faithful and devoted, he unconsciously took advantage of her post-trauma listlessness to secure her hand. The novel ends with Raphaël's murder of his and Saffie's son Emil, born out of his anger at and resentment of Emil's role in Saffie's affair as silent witness. The omniscient narrative voice in *L'Empreinte de l'ange* leaves us in no doubt of Raphaël's final guilt, contrary to the narrative voice in *Une Adoration* which allows us to judge each party for ourselves.<sup>226</sup>

*Une Adoration* takes the form of a murder case in its entirety, albeit an unconventional one. The court-case takes place over the course of thirteen days to determine the murderer of Berrichon-born Cosmo, a famous comedian killed with a knife in 1989. The novel is composed of twenty-five narrative voices who present personal memories of Cosmo to a silent judge referred to as *Votre Honneur*. Though

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<sup>226</sup> Nancy Huston, *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1998), p. 319. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

Elke – Cosmo’s lover – ultimately admits to killing Cosmo, the final verdict is left not to the judge but to the reader, and the polyphonic form of the novel presents us not with tangible evidence typical of a court-case but with anecdotal fragments which attempt, in Elke’s words, to reconstruct ‘la chaleur de son corps matériel.’<sup>227</sup> The witnesses themselves are equally unorthodox, ranging from family, friends and lovers to Don Juan, a river, a dead doe and the guilty knife, a surrealist narrative structure redolent of magical realism. This novel can also be said to emulate a Camusian ethos by using the structural device of the court-case to complicate notions of objective truth and guilt.<sup>228</sup> After all, Elke herself considers her action not as a murder but as an operation, since she claims he would have died painfully from a recently found tumour (352 and 378). Yet conventional readings of her actions could lead us to believe that Elke killed him out of jealousy, since Cosmo fell in love with a man named Jonas who usurped her place as primary confidante and lover. The judiciary ambivalence thus goes hand in hand with romantic ambiguity in this novel. Cosmo is the antithesis of a romantic hero in being bisexual and polygamous, and his relationship with Elke is not secure or strong in any conventional terms. Cosmo fails to perform sexually for a period of their relationship, he occasionally visits other men and women for sexual favours, and is often absent for long periods of time. This is all the more disruptive for Elke since she has two children – Frank and Fiona – who suffer from the instability of Cosmo’s commitment. Yet the narrative voice of Elke refuses to equate this instability with a lack of constancy, and she presents him as an ideal partner as do all his male and female lovers given a narrative voice (235).

The relationships between men and women in this novel thus paradoxically replicate and subvert the heteronormative structures outlined in Huston’s *Reflets* and those at play in *L’Empreinte de l’Ange* between Saffie and Raphaël. I will examine how the latter operate as socio-political pastiche, before explaining how Saffie and Andrés’ relationship serves to debunk a monolithic and sexually unequal vision of the heterosexual unit, breaking a gendered subject-object dichotomy and

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<sup>227</sup> Nancy Huston, *Une Adoration* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2003), p. 38. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>228</sup> The key protagonist and anti-hero of Camus’ *L’Etranger*, Meursault, argues that the burning sun caused him to shoot a man, as opposed to any calculated rationale as the judge would have it. Albert Camus, *L’Etranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 64.



problematizing idealised notions of motherhood. I will then examine how Huston similarly challenges the mother-whore boundary in *Une Adoration*, and produces a highly pluralised portrait of (chiefly feminine) sexual identity within plainly gendered parameters.

### **‘L’Homme blanc lui-même’**

The representation of love and marriage at the outset of *L’Empreinte de l’ange* is anything but an equal one. In her relationship with Raphaël, Saffie is presented as a passive object of Raphaël’s affections, devoid of agency. She is described by the omniscient narrative voice at the beginning of the novel as being both present and absent: ‘Cette femme est là, et en même temps elle est absente; ça saute aux yeux.’ (16), which we later find out to be owing to traumatic war-time episodes.<sup>229</sup> Raphaël, on the other hand, is master of her and his home (31), and is attracted to Saffie’s indifference itself (18) (as with Arcan’s ex, chapter one). Raphaël’s position as a white, middle-class Parisian, who inherits a fortune reaped in part through the colonisation of Algeria,<sup>230</sup> marks him out as *the* dominant male of the novel, and is a fictional reconfiguration of what Deleuze and Guattari term ‘l’Homme blanc lui-même’.<sup>231</sup> Raphaël in this novel constitutes the primary figure of dominance against which the other protagonists are shown to be dominated, be that as women, immigrants or working-class figures.

This is supported by the reference to his regular erections: ‘Re-ascenseur, re-érection, re-exercice de détente, re-clef dans la serrure sans tremblement de la main.’ (33). The positioning of his erections amongst the banal events of the quotidian imply that Raphaël’s desire constitutes an ordinary part of his life, just as Huston says is the case for men as a sex as I previously concluded. For this reason, we can read his and Saffie’s relationship as a microcosm of universal male-female relations

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<sup>229</sup> Saffie’s mother’s rape by Communists, her mother’s suicide, Saffie’s beating by relatives (185-187), Saffie’s brother enlisting in Hitlerjugend (265-266) and her father’s contribution to the extermination of the Jews (266).

<sup>230</sup> Diana Holmes, ‘To Write is a Transitive Verb: Nancy Huston and the Ethics of the Novel’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 14.1 (2010), 85-92 (p. 90).

<sup>231</sup> Term coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. They developed a theory on the machine of ‘visagéité’ (the ‘faciality machine’) maintaining that structures of domination could be based on comparisons between one’s face and that of the dominant face *par excellence* of ‘White Man himself’. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2 : Milles plateaux* (Paris : Minuit, 1980), p. 216.

in sex, with Raphaël matching Jones' description of the classic romance hero as 'richer, wiser in the ways of the world [...] than the heroine',<sup>232</sup> and Saffie meeting the requirements for the erotic romance heroine identified by Ann Barr Snitow, that her identity should fulfil the needs and desires of the male protagonist socially, domestically or sexually.<sup>233</sup> The power dynamic between Saffie and Raphaël matches Snitow's description perfectly since, as Holmes asserts, 'Raphaël "loves" in Saffie the fulfilment of his own needs.'<sup>234</sup> Their marriage constitutes a neat pastiche of twentieth-century conjugal norms, and their sexual relations contain all of the essentialist tropes set out by Huston in her non-fiction, namely gendered subject-object dichotomies and the Madonna-whore complex. Before their first sexual encounter, Raphaël does not consider Saffie's personality but questions her virginity (38), and his belief that 'elle en a vu, des vertes et des pas mûres' (38) can be interpreted as legitimising his decision to have sex with her since she is no longer a Madonna figure. When he finally makes love to her, he decides to do so with her still in her uniform, an obvious pornographic cliché. Indeed, the link between their actions and mainstream pornography are clear when Saffie is said to experience them like a film (51). He does so, moreover, with 'la brusquerie du désir, son sexe est bandé à bloc et il le contrôle, oui, il sait contrôler le déroulement des gestes de l'amour pour en tirer un maximum de beauté, comme dans une symphonie' (47-48). His decision to prolong the experience is somewhat different to the primarily reproductive vision proposed by Huston in *Reflets*, but his 'brusquerie', his sex 'bandé à bloc' and the male control of the action is a perfect fictional reconstitution of the model of instinctual sexual practice proposed by Huston in *Reflets*. The alliteration of plosive [b]s also serves to emphasise male dominance here; its sexual nature reinforced on a bodily level by the labial character of the consonants.

Whilst Raphaël enjoys the experience and yearns for Saffie to desire him in return (50), moreover, Saffie remains indifferent as she admires her handiwork on the mirror she cleaned earlier ('Avec une certaine satisfaction elle constate que sur toute la surface brillante de la glace, il n'y a pas la moindre traînée de chiffon' [49]),

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<sup>232</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>233</sup> Ann Barr Snitow, 'Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different', in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 258-275 (p. 265).

<sup>234</sup> Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

and Raphaël recognises that she will always submit to his desire (50-51). As the narrative voice explains, *he* made love to *her* ('Ils ne font pas l'amour ensemble, non, loin de là : Raphaël fait l'amour à Saffie.' [52]). Raphaël even draws a parallel between Saffie's submission and Hans Bellmer's doll (50-51) (chapter one). This is additionally exemplified through the *double entendre* of 'traînée' and potential double meaning of 'chiffon' in the above quotation. The 'traînée de chiffon' is emblematic of Saffie's domestic duties and subservient position as a wife, but also of her potential position as a fallen woman ('traînée') and rag doll (poupée de 'chiffon'). The fact that Saffie notices herself as whore in the mirror is also significant given that it exemplifies a feminine embodiment of the male gaze (gazing at oneself not as a free subject, but as the fallen object of male desire), and alludes to the Lacanian mirror stage when one recognises oneself as subject for the first time, through the illusionary acceptance of our mirror image as ourselves.<sup>235</sup> Here, Saffie's gaze into the mirror confirms her object-status instead (chapter one), as emphasised by the assimilation to a rag doll. Saffie and Raphaël thus serve as apt metaphors of the female and male condition laid out by Huston in *Reflets*, with Saffie adopting the role of passive desired object, and Raphaël that of desiring active subject; the only difference being that Raphaël appears to love Saffie, and that Saffie never feigns to love Raphaël. It is also clear that these structures replicate those Huston criticises in mainstream pornography (chapter one). The parallel to Huston's claims in *Reflets*, however, only stands if we presume *a priori* a lack of irony. If we read these passages ironically, they read as a satire of twentieth century conventions around sex and gender far more than they reify essentialist theory.

The narrative structures in this novel certainly encourage this latter reading. As I will discuss in the ensuing paragraphs, Saffie's relationship with Andrés is more equal in terms of power dynamics, thereby shedding critical light on her marriage to Raphaël through juxtaposition. Saffie's characterisation is also privileged over Raphaël's to solicit empathy in her favour, with the narrative devoting demonstrably more attention to her personal development than Raphaël's. We are made aware that his career progresses in inverse relation to his private life (as public acclaim for his playing increases, so does the time his wife spends with her lover [152 and 237-240]), yet what he thinks or feels is seldom enunciated. In those rare instances where

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<sup>235</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris : Seuil, 1966), p. 178.

the free indirect discourse shifts to Raphaël's perspective, the narrative voice employs rhetorical questions so that the reader is invited to respond (often in the negative). This is clear when Raphaël deduces that Saffie is pregnant, which he considers the optimum solution to her disaffection, the narrative voice asking 'Quel moyen plus sûr d'y parvenir [à sa joie de vivre] que de porter en soi-même, et de donner soi-même...la vie ?' (72) One can pre-empt the outcome given Saffie's earlier despondent response to her marriage ('[ses lèvres] n'expriment pas un iota de sentiment de plus qu'avant le mariage' [65]), and his assumption reads more as further dominance than affective care, as is clear from his reference to her foetus as 'un petit Raphael II' (71) on the previous page. Raphael's lack of taste and empathy is therefore carefully foregrounded which lays the groundwork for a critical reaction on the part of the reader (in this case, to the unquestioning equation of child-bearing with *joie de vivre*). Conversely, the narrative voice of Saffie is never subject to the reader's judgement in this same naked way, granting her more respect since her views are comparatively well-protected (contrasted to her body which is subject to Raphaël's sexual advances). The focalisation is also engineered so that we observe scenes from her perspective, literally seeing the world through her eyes ('elle s'allonge de nouveau sur son lit, les yeux ouverts. Regarde le plafond' [42]; 'Saffie regarde le plafond' [77]), or gaining insight into her neurotic behaviour through repetitive language: 'elle, lave. Elle lave.' (93) The punctuation here emphasises the second anaphoric utterance and the mental stasis it denotes. In short, the evident narrative bias and tactical narrative structures promote an ironic reading of the gendered structures inherent to Saffie and Raphaël's relationship, satirising rather than legitimating Huston's thesis in *Reflets*.

The second point of irony is structural, and lies in the fact that Saffie, not Raphaël, commits adultery. Raphaël, in fact, is said never to have contemplated sex with another woman (86). Furthermore, the narrative voice goes as far as to suggest that having an affair makes Saffie a better mother (162-164 and 168), whilst she was resoundingly averse to maternal tasks prior to her liaison with Andrés and tried to abort her child with a knitting needle (74-76). In this sense Huston overturns the key structures outlined in *Reflets*, since we are here presented with a polygamous and non-maternal female figure who is against and undoes dichotomic patriarchal structures. It is no surprise then that Day (writing on the subject of Saffie's trauma/s) considers her act of infidelity to be a sign of hope, an instance of initiative that

attests to her intense capacity for survival.<sup>236</sup> By dint of the narrative strategies outlined above, Saffie nonetheless remains the unequivocal heroine of the novel which causes readers to rethink the innateness of maternity and the ethics of infidelity on circumstantial grounds.

**...Or a *Luthier***

Saffie's entire relationship with Andrés from beginning to end defies the essentialist conventions of gendered sexuality proposed by Huston. In the very first instance, Saffie takes the initiative with Andrés: 'Saffie, à ce moment, fait une chose inattendue. Elle prend l'initiative. Se dégageant de la prise de l'homme, elle pose ses deux mains sur sa taille [...] et se laisse glisser vers le bas.' (148) We are also informed that Saffie achieves an orgasm once Andrés places his hands on her head (148-149), and that throughout the process 'Aucun des deux n'a quitté le moindre vêtement' (150). The erotic scene is thus finalised without being physically consummated, undermining the emphasis on reproduction in *Reflets* (granted Huston does not claim sex to be performed exclusively for the purposes of reproduction). A scene towards the end of the novel is more in alignment with the norms delineated in *Reflets*, when Andrés repeatedly slaps Saffie before throttling her whilst he ejaculates inside her (271). The narrative voice even implies that he strangles her to death, before explaining that 'ils ne l'ont pas fait.' (272) In this instance, male control and female objectification come back into play. However, this violence is experienced not as a violation but as a therapeutic catharsis. This scene occurs after the revelation that Saffie's father was implicated in the persecution of the Jews, which Andrés finds hard to bear owing to his uncle and father's murder and his own experience of oppression as a Jew. His restrained beating of Saffie also operates partially in her favour, allowing her to be punished for her father's actions and thus enabling her to move beyond her guilt and post-war trauma. She is thus liberated through her violent objectification. In addition, the term 'Ils' dictates that Saffie and Andrés, even were he to kill her, would both have been involved in the act. Objectification and violence can be ethical and emancipatory then, provided the targeted object is consenting, and female objectification does not necessarily signal

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<sup>236</sup> Loraine Day, 'Trauma and the Bilingual Subject in Nancy Huston's *L'Empreinte de l'ange*', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 81 (2007), pp. 95-108 (p. 100).

gender inequality (chapter one). The ethical parameters of objectification in this scene also clearly depend on a woman's past experiences for their semantic value (chapter three). In this way, Saffie and Andrés' relationship resembles not the essentialist model proposed by Huston nor those of mainstream pornography denounced by Huston herself, but a loving relationship conducive to being both subject and object as Huston suggested during her conference 'Belle comme une image'.

### **Clowns and Apricots: Tickets to a Better Future?**

Huston is equally eager to rethink the question of female objectification in *Une Adoration*, and to yet again problematise the mother-whore complex. At the beginning of the novel Frank refers to his mother Elke as a sexual object (28), and the narrative voices of Frank and Fiona – her children – show their disgust and embarrassment following Elke's description of love and sex to the judge (30-31), yet Huston continues to unravel Elke's story to sexualise her as a mother. Elke's sexualisation is shown to carry significant dangers when Frank exclaims 'je le tuerai je le tuerai !' after seeing Cosmo (her lover) fornicating with a man named Jonas in a park, and his friend Kacim explicates the rationale for Frank's anger in the following way:

il crachait sur ce monsieur là-bas au lac qui avait humilié sa mère, d'abord en la sautant et ensuite, si j'ai bien compris, en ne la sautant plus. Sans suivre toute l'histoire dans le détail, je pouvais me mettre à sa place. Sans doute que vous aussi, Votre Honneur, tous les hommes sont sensibles au sujet de la chasteté de leur mère, c'est normal [...]. (375).

Freudian allusions aside, it is evident that Huston is alluding to the conceptualisation of the mother as virgin and seeking to undermine it. Elke, moreover, is not a conventionally maternal figure by any means. Her unorthodox relationship with Cosmo is obviously uncomfortable for her son Frank who refers to him as 'le clown-fornicateur' (28), and she is often absent and fails to recognise and prevent Fiona's fall from grace, an attitude which goes against Huston's references to women's desire for a secure domestic sphere for their children.

Fiona is abused by her brother's friends as a teenager on the command of her brother (299-300), who eventually oversees her employment as a prostitute (342-343). Fiona is described as a voluptuous early-bloomer, whose large breasts and

youth make her a desirable and accessible target for multiple men from which an attempted rape ensues (357-358). Here we can draw a parallel with Huston's discourse in *Reflets*, where she suggests that men are naturally attracted to young, curvy women. This asymmetry notwithstanding Huston certainly does not condone such behaviour, and the closing passage of the novel indicates that women should be able to embrace their bodies as a site of desire without being oppressed or violated:

les femmes n'hésitent plus à entrer au bistrot, on y voit même de toutes jeunes filles, des adolescentes filiformes comme Milena la fille de Fiona, elles s'installent à la terrasse et sirotent des jus d'abricot en fumant des cigarettes mentholées...

Tout change Votre Honneur ! (393)

This passage points to a utopian future, in which young attractive women are not threatened or oppressed by this biologically controlled sex-appeal. Fiona, for instance, might have enjoyed her bodily assets as a free and sexually active woman without sexual violence, were it not for an absent mother and sadistic brother, as her daughter Milena can in the closing passage.

### **Sexual Differences, with A Difference**

The danger presented to women by their objectification is counteracted throughout this novel by alternative presentations of male and female sexuality. Of all dominant sexual discourses, Huston is particularly keen to replace tropes from mainstream pornography with more ethical, and sensual alternatives (chapter one). One key allusion to this concept is Elke's reference to Cosmo licking her shoulder blade and collar bone (26), a gesture reflective of Cosmo's complex characterisation. On the one hand, he is referred to as an irreverent 'Don Juan' (28) who shares his sexual escapades with his lover Elke (225), regardless of whether they were undertaken during or before their relationship. This disregard for Elke's feelings and his repeated infidelity certainly corroborates Huston's theory in *Reflets*, as does Elke and other women's unfailing devotion and obedience (182 and 235). On the other, Cosmo's bisexuality (345 and 372-373) intimates that his sexual desire is not driven purely by a subconscious reproductive force. He also struggles to maintain an erection during the early stages of his relationship with Elke (182) despite their close emotional connection, and the erotic scenes described in this novel are never actually

consummated (as with Andrés and Saffie's first liaison), as can be seen in a scene narrated by 'la glycine':

Cosmo a poussé une plainte basse, presque féminine, il a murmuré son nom à plusieurs reprises, elle a murmuré le sien, et même si ce n'étaient pas leurs vrais noms cela a produit un effet, j'en suis témoin, ils avaient maintenant tout le corps battant de désir, une sueur érotique exsudait de leurs pores. [...] [II] n'y avait aucune fausse pudeur, Elke ne poussait pas de petits gloussements comme si souvent les femmes au moment de quitter leurs vêtements, lorsque, se voyant de l'extérieur, elles sont gênées par ce qu'elles s'apprêtent à faire, n'en percevant plus soudain que l'aspect animal, incongru et donc comique – là pas du tout, on aurait dit que le déshabillage faisait partie d'une chorégraphie antique, immémoriale, inexorable, enfin ils étaient nus l'un contre l'autre et, arrachant les couvertures du lit, ils se sont laissés tomber sur le drap. Tout glissant de sueur, ils ont roulé l'un sur l'autre, haletant, se mordant et se serrant fortement, et puis, de façon imperceptible, cela a ralenti, les halètements se sont espacés et Elke a compris que, dans ses bras, Cosmo dormait. (141-143)

One cannot say, then, that Cosmo is orientated by hetero-reproductive impulses, nor that his polygamous nature sets him out as a typical man according to Huston's theorisation, since the erotic climax in this scene occurs without penile ejaculation. Indeed, the masculine norm put forward by Huston in *Reflets* is entirely at odds with Cosmo's actions and sounds in this scene, in which he falls asleep in lieu of ejaculating, and in which his moans are 'presque féminine'. Interestingly moreover, nothing about this scene is considered "unnatural" by the narrative voice. The equal and non-reproductive sexual scene (given the lack of ejaculation) is still described as revealing 'l'aspect animal' of both protagonists.

The word 'presque' above is essential in ensuring that we recognise Cosmo's masculinity as well as his borderline femininity, so that we may conceive of the terms masculine and feminine as unequivocal markers of identity even whilst they are positioned on a spectrum (in keeping with the relativist theory of Rosi



Braidotti).<sup>237</sup> In addition, Elke here is presented as neither wholly subject nor object, which reinforces Huston's more nuanced view that a woman can reconcile both sides of herself if she be in love. The presentation of sexual intercourse in this quotation is thus diametrically opposed to the biological norm presented in *Reflets*. On the other hand, the reference to 'une chorégraphie antique' alludes to the connection to a wider, quasi-universal temporality, akin to Huston's feminine temporality which is intimately tied to the 'antique' process of reproduction. There is also a heightened scopopic focus on the materiality of sexual intercourse, particularly sweat ('une sueur érotique exsudait de leurs pores'; 'Tout glissant de sueur'). This is similar to Chantal Chawaf's proposed model of feminine writing in 'Linguistic Flesh', as a means of translating corporeal experience into writing, and of drawing upon the 'political fecundity' of such secretions as sperm, mucus and milk; a bridging of two creative practices, the reproductive and the literary.<sup>238</sup> This emphasis on materiality and maternal creation is redolent of Huston's aforementioned description of women's attuned connection to a material reality, and thus to a different temporality to men (being reminded of their own mortality, and potential for producing an-other), and Huston's theory thus merges into her literary practice as Chawaf proposed. What is privileged here is thus a female sexuality and temporality.

Additionally, Elke and Cosmo perform the same gestures in this scene, both biting and undressing one another, and it is impossible to differentiate between them during the acme of their passion since they are referred to by the collective 'Ils', and become fused together ('ils étaient nus l'un contre l'autre', 'ils ont roulé l'un sur l'autre') as do Rena, Kamal and the infrared camera in *Infrarouge* (chapter one). Yet Cosmo and Elke do not for that lose their gender specificity. Cosmo is nearly but not actually feminine, and Elke's femininity may be neutralised in the mid-section of this erotic scene, but the final image of Cosmo lying in her arms alludes to her position as a mother, even potentially emulating the classical image of the pieta. This allusion desacralises the figure of the Madonna and thus dismantles the mother-

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<sup>237</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory', in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 437-439 (pp. 437-439).

<sup>238</sup> Chawaf, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

whose antinomy which is intrinsically supported by the myth of the Virgin Mary.<sup>239</sup> This sexualisation of the mother figure answers to Huston's own call for the reinstatement of maternal temporalities and sexuality in literature, and recalls the importance of the mother figure in Cixous' *écriture féminine* project, edified by Cixous' references in 'Sorties' to a 'voix mêlée avec le lait' and to women writing 'à l'encre blanche.'<sup>240</sup> It is therefore clear that Huston does not wish to do away with sexual difference, since Elke symbolises the figure of the mother and Cosmo that of the masculine, yet the absence of further gendered motifs allows less conventional sexual identities to play out. There is thus a bisexual mode of representation at work within a framework of sexual difference.

### **'Chorale de Femmes'**

Huston similarly aims to pluralise our conception of feminine sexual identity through a collective statement (ironically) made by the 'Chorale de Femmes', Cosmo's previous lovers:

Nous n'étions pas jalouses les unes des autres. Comment demander à cet homme-là de s'appauvrir, se circonscrire, s'arrêter, s'enfermer, se nier, en n'aimant qu'une seule femme ? Nous n'y songions même pas ! Nous n'étions pas en manque, car Cosmo donnait à chacune de nous plus qu'elle n'en n'avait jamais reçu. Certes il jonglait avec nous, mais il ne jouait pas l'une contre l'autre ; c'était un privilège d'être une balle dans les mains de ce jongleur-là ! Les autres hommes nous transformaient en miroir, en punching-ball, en taille-crayon (non ? vous ne voyez pas ce qu'on veut dire ?), en maman, en putain... alors que lui... (235)

He thus gave them more than other men had, and treated them as more than just mothers or whores, overcoming the Madonna-whore dichotomy and that of mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity. If this is the solution through love proposed by Huston in 'Belle Comme une Image', it is certainly at odds with the traditional model (Plato's 'other halves' in the *Symposium*),<sup>241</sup> encompassing more transitory

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<sup>239</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Hérétique de l'amour', *Tel quel : Littérature/Philosophie/Science/Politique*, 74 (1977), 30-49 (p. 46).

<sup>240</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>241</sup> Plato, *Collected Works of Plato*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953), pp. 520-525.

relationships. As for the women themselves, they are outside of the normative feminine mould established by Huston in *Reflets* in being happy to share one man: they need not seek a monogamous relationship with Cosmo, because he has already satisfied them by his presence. The sardonicism of this statement should not go unmentioned, particularly in the rhetorical phrase ‘Comment demander à cet homme-là de s’appauvrir, se circonscrire, s’arrêter, s’enfermer, se nier, en n’aimant qu’une seule femme ?’, and through the women’s frank acceptance of their being ‘juggled’. This plays into the fantasy of the male imaginary popularised in visual pornography of a male protagonist surrounded by multiple women.<sup>242</sup> The ability to arouse and satiate all women (more so than their previous male partners) is also eponymously alluded to through Cosmo’s self-given title, connoting his omnipresence and omnipotence. Yet Cosmo’s power here is exploited not to appease a male ego, but to advocate the empowerment of women instead, and these erotic structures work not in the interest of the male gaze but female pleasure. Additionally, Cosmo is wholly disempowered by his death and absence from the narrative thread, and his function here consists only in enabling the women’s narratives and their iteration of how *they* enjoy sex.

What Cosmo thinks and feels is relatively irrelevant, since that which is given precedence is the emotive and sensual response of the women. All women, for one thing, are made to feel beautiful by Cosmo, whether young or old:

Sous le regard et sous les mains de Cosmo, aucune femme ne pouvait être laide. Toutes, nous étions belles ! Chaque vie – unique, fragile, frémissante – est belle d’être un fragment d’infini posé sur l’arc fini du temps. Auprès de lui, tout ce qui dans notre corps nous faisait honte en temps normal nous rendait fières car nous pouvions en parler. (237)

The women’s collective identity as a ‘Chorale de Femmes’ does not detract from their uniqueness, and Cosmo is aggrandised not for his male prowess *per se*, but for his appreciation of women’s bodies individually and collectively. The temporal references in this passage are especially noteworthy, women being connected to a finite ‘arc’, yet defined as ‘un fragment d’infini’. This latter assimilation of women’s bodies with the infinite is reminiscent of Cixous’ reference to women’s libido and

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<sup>242</sup> Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), p. xxv.

writing as such: ‘Sa libido est cosmique, comme son inconscient est mondial : son écriture ne peut aussi que se poursuivre, sans jamais inscrire ou discerner de contours [...]’.<sup>243</sup> The implication of limitlessness attached to the name Cosmo is extended to the women he frequents, alluding to the ‘contours’ affecting women’s sexual and bodily experiences, and which their relationships with Cosmo help them to open up. In Cosmo’s arms then, it seems women experience pride not shame, a sense of community is constructed amongst women in the place of jealousy, and limits to women’s bodies and their sexuality are pushed back. Against immediate appearances, the relationship between Cosmo and the ‘cosmos’ of women who flock to him disrupts rather than substantiates the gendered structures of heteronormative sexual practice charted in *Reflets*.

### **Conclusion**

Where the sex industry privileges male sexuality to profit a neo-liberal market (chapter one), Huston’s portrayal of sex highlights instead the idiosyncrasies and diversity of female sexuality and temporality. In so doing, Huston indirectly invites men to explore alternative facets of their sexuality, rather than playing on their innate preferences. This is not only a creative alternative to dominant sexual discourses (chapter one), but to what Huston considers to be the innate status quo of sexual hierarchies, where men are the dominant subject and normative male sexuality the priority. Huston does indeed believe, as shown in *Reflets* and *Carnets*, that men are instinctively the dominant subject in sexual practice and women dominated objects (or else desexualised subjects), but I have also shown that Huston presents women in *Professeurs de désespoir*, *Journal de la création*, *L’Empreinte de l’ange* and *Une Adoration* as endowed with a connection to a specifically female, material temporality and condition, and that women could be both subject and object when in a loving relationship (if loving is understood in a loose, less traditional sense, inclusive of polygamous and transient relationships). If Huston’s essentialist view on sexual difference in *Reflets* provides little hope for female empowerment in the sexual arena, Huston’s other essays and novels succeed in mediating this bleak message, and in providing the foundations for possible counter-narratives and feminist reparation. In so doing, she responds to her own demands made in *Carnets*

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<sup>243</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

(to recognise and *counter* biological and social gender norms), and thus marries practice with theory. In the next section, I will propose that Arcan's determinist arguments should be reconsidered too, by examining individual points in relation to narrative tone and techniques. In so doing, I will put forward an opposing interpretation to the one Huston outlines in 'Arcan, Philosophe'.

### **2.3 Abjection and the Feminine Condition in Arcan's *Putain* and *Burqa de chair***

In the first section of this chapter I referred to some of the ways in which Ernaux sublimates abjection through writing. I will here explore how Arcan queries the borders of abjection to overturn dominant discourses on sexual development, particularly psychoanalytic theory and essentialist gender theories. To argue this case, however, I must first dismantle the conviction commonly held that Arcan is a biological determinist. In her introduction to Arcan's *Burqa de Chair* (2011), touchingly called 'Arcan, Philosophe', Huston claims that Arcan's views reinforce an essentialist reading of gender and sexual development, and that the oedipal framework central to Arcan's corpus emphasises the link between sex and procreation, and thus serves to contravene the Madonna-whore complex by associating prostitution with motherhood.<sup>244</sup> This opinion that Arcan reproduces an essentialist rhetoric cannot be denied. Indeed, one could say that she legitimises gender inequality too, since she claims in *Putain* (2001) that women are innately drawn to older, richer men, and men to younger more beautiful women, and that women must therefore co-exist in a perpetual state of competition and as objects of the male gaze,<sup>245</sup> in keeping with the structures set up by Huston in *Reflets*. Yet if one takes into consideration the extent of Arcan's constructionist views, and if one interprets her essentialist commentaries with a certain level of irony as Isabelle Boisclair and María-Dolores Picazo suggest,<sup>246</sup> and with a view in mind of Arcan's

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<sup>244</sup> Huston, 'Arcan, Philosophe', pp. 20-22.

<sup>245</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Putain* (Paris : Seuil, 2001), pp. 16 and 43. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>246</sup> Isabelle Boisclair, 'Le Je de la prostituée au prisme de l'agentivité sexuelle', paper presented at *Overstepping the Boundaries/Transgresser les Limites: 21st-Century Women's Writing in French*, University of London, 29 October 2016.

formal choices as Rosso maintains,<sup>247</sup> these appear to operate as hyperbolic satires of normative gender conventions as opposed to their reinforcement, as we saw to be the case with Huston's portrayal of Saffie and Raphaël. Indeed, Arcan later rejects these hierarchised perspectives and claims a relationship between a young, beautiful man and woman to be the most natural of relationships (*Putain* 159-160). This is the standpoint I will adopt throughout this section. I will counter Huston's interpretation by drawing attention to examples of constructionist ideology instead in Arcan's *Putain* and *Burqa de chair*, namely her nihilist and feminist analyses of the feminine condition, and of the religious and other cultural mythologies which entrench it.

Julie Tremblay-Devirieux, who has produced an exhaustive record of abjection in Arcan's works, believes like Huston that Arcan supports biological determinism.<sup>248</sup> Throughout her master's thesis, she argues that Arcan presents the reader with numerous abject figures (both male and female) to unmask oppressive norms and cultures, and the oppressive quality of phallocentrism, yet she believes Arcan upholds a predominantly determinist stance all the same.<sup>249</sup> I will here examine Arcan's use of abjection to argue the opposite: that Arcan overturns essentialist theory precisely through her critique of oppressive norms and androcentrism. Tremblay-Devirieux explores a number of abject figures in Arcan's work, ranging from ghosts to vermin,<sup>250</sup> though those of most interest to this study are the *larve* and *putain*, the former referring to sexually undesirable women like the mother figure in 'La Robe' and *Putain*.<sup>251</sup> To Tremblay-Devirieux's list, I would also like to add that of the *schtroumpfette* as a character who bridges the symbolic space of the daughter, writer and prostitute; a figurative representation of Arcan herself. In this way, Arcan appends additional layers to the figure of the prostitute, commonly

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María-Dolores Picazo, 'Le Pouvoir dévastateur du regard dans *A Ciel ouvert* de Nelly Arcan', paper presented at *Overstepping the Boundaries*.

<sup>247</sup> Rosso mentions her part fictional, part referential style, which 'pousse le lecteur à jouer au détective-voyeur.' Karine Rosso, 'Nelly Arcan et Nancy Huston en dialogue', in *Nelly Arcan : Trajectoires fulgurantes*, ed. by Isabelle Boisclair and others (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2017), pp. 63-86 (p. 73).

<sup>248</sup> Julie Tremblay-Devirieux, 'L'Abjection dans les récits de Nelly Arcan' (unpublished master's thesis, Université de Montréal, 2012), p. 110.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>250</sup> To name most of them: larvae, vermin, bitches, mothers, a hydrae mother-daughter, cadaver, pillar of salt, ghost and Frankenstein-esque and martyred women. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

accepted as an abject figure, by presenting herself as abject to another degree in being neither wholly prostitute nor wholly philosopher, and thus evading fixed categories of being in keeping with Kristeva's definition (chapter one). This layering of abjection enables Arcan to problematise the borders of abjection and, by extension, what is meant by the feminine condition. I will argue that she uses narrative form and her philosophical and psychoanalytic arguments (heavily concentrated on the *stade du miroir*) to sublimate her own abject-status in *Burqa de chair* and *Putain*, and dramatically revise our understanding of the various abject-spaces occupied by other women. As with my reading of *Folle* moreover, I will refer to the narrative voice of *Putain* as Arcan, though I am aware that Arcan-as-narrator is not perfectly analogous with Arcan-as-author (chapter one).

### ***Burqa de chair and Putain***

*Burqa de chair* is a collation of Arcan's essays and stories – autobiographical for the most part – published posthumously in the wake of Arcan's suicide. Some had already been published previously as newspaper columns and one as an illustrated edition ('L'Enfant dans le miroir'<sup>252</sup>). The title of this collection references back to the term coined by Arcan in her autofictional novel *A Ciel ouvert*, which encapsulates the notion that Western women are prevented from showing themselves as they truly are, being obliged to veil themselves with layers of artifice (chapter one). In this way, Arcan alludes to the cross-cultural reach of women's oppressive condition, by which all women's bodies are veiled in some shape or form (chapter three).<sup>253</sup> The following definition of *burqa de chair* is provided on Nelly Arcan's eponymous website:

l'acharnement esthétique et plastique sous lequel les femmes se drapent et qui finit par devenir leur corps. Par des procédés diamétralement opposés à ceux de la burqa traditionnelle, qui dissimule la femme et ses potentialités de séduction, la burqa de chair produit néanmoins le même effet : la femme

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<sup>252</sup> Nelly Arcan, *L'Enfant dans le miroir*, with illustrations by Pascale Bourguignon (Montréal : Marchand de feuilles, 2007)

<sup>253</sup> This is emphasised in *Burqa de chair* through the assimilation between tribal masks in Africa and Arcan's acne facial cream which she uses as a teenager, which creates a hard layer on her skin. Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, p. 78. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

disparaît derrière un voile, fait non pas de tissu mais d'appâts artificiels ; ne subsiste du corps ainsi transformé que le sexe.<sup>254</sup>

This definition is highly germane to the themes under discussion in this collection of texts, particularly 'L'Enfant dans le miroir'. Published as a separate edition along with illustrations by Pascale Bourguignon, it outlines the moment when Arcan begins to conceive of herself as an object of desire once she looks into a mirror as a prepubescent girl. The imagery of the mirror is used to juxtapose her innocence as a child, where she stuck her tongue out in jest, with her coming-of-age and budding hatred of her body – the burden of all women as this collection suggests. Other stories include 'La Honte', a reworking of Arcan's news story which she posted to her official website ([nellyarcan.com](http://nellyarcan.com))<sup>255</sup> shortly after her infamous television interview with Guy Lepage on *Tout le monde en parle* in Quebec,<sup>256</sup> where she was publicly denigrated for her 'décolleté' and treated as a sexualised object rather than an author, and 'La Robe' in which Arcan speaks of her depression, her mother's decrepit body and her aversion to ageing. In all these stories the familiar motifs of the beauty industry,<sup>257</sup> flesh, death<sup>258</sup> and meat<sup>259</sup> arise in keeping with the imagery central to *A Ciel ouvert* (chapter one), and with the conceptualisation of flesh as a burqa or cage. This corporeal semantic field enables Arcan to attest to social conventions of feminine beauty, and to problematise these by questioning and/or putting forward multiple models of abjection.

*Putain* pre-empts many of these themes, although it is Arcan's first text to be published, ten years earlier than her final work *Burqa de chair*. *Putain* is an autobiographical account of Arcan's experiences working in the sex industry. Arcan also maps out her negative relationship with her body from child to adulthood –

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<sup>254</sup> Fabien Loszach, 'Burqa de chair', in *nellyarcan.com* <<http://nellyarcan.com/pages/burqa-de-chair.php>> [accessed 10 January 2017]

<sup>255</sup> Paul Arcand, 'Entrevue : Guy Lepage, animateur de Tout le monde en parle. Réaction à un texte de Nelly Arcan sur son passage à TLME', *Puisqu'il faut se lever*, 98.5 FM Montréal, 13 September 2011.

<sup>256</sup> Guy A. Lepage, 'Entrevue avec Nelly Arcan', *Tout le monde en parle*, ICI Radio-Canada Télé, 16 September 2007.

<sup>257</sup> Especially in Arcan, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>258</sup> Arcan, *Putain*, p. 87.

<sup>259</sup> See Arcan, *Burqa*, pp. 74 and 81.



which is explored in more detail in *Burqa de chair* – and highlights paradoxes central to the female condition, chiefly that of *larve-schtroumpfette* (177).

### **The Eternal Recurrence of the Feminine Condition**

Arcan makes it clear in *Putain* that her experiences as a prostitute are not unique but reflective of the broader course of women's history, and that men's attraction to her is not owing to the distinctiveness of her appearance but her 'putasserie' (19). Men sleep not with her alone, but with a whole host of women, or what Arcan terms 'une armée de femmes' (21), and her sexual experiences are connected to the course of human history in keeping with Huston's aforementioned views: '*s'il fait appel à ce qu'il y a en moi de plus intime, il y a aussi de l'universel, quelque chose d'archaïque*' (17) [author's italics]. Where the 'chorégraphie antique' referred to between Elke and Cosmo in Huston's *Une Adoration* is a positive one, however, Arcan's is a nihilistic vision, in which women are fated to have their freedom curtailed:

je voudrais être un homme pour avoir une femme et des enfants, pour courir les putains qui auraient l'âge de ma fille, j'aimerais ne pas être une femme pour ne pas larver devant le miroir, pour ne pas avoir cette nature de poupée qui ne me pousse pas vers de jeunes garçons qui auraient l'âge de mon fils si je pouvais en avoir un [...]. (123)

Men are permitted to enjoy both the pleasures of family life and debauchery, morality and sex, whilst women must opt for one or the other and to either desexualise or hyper-sexualise themselves for the gratification of men. Women are condemned to be not-something (not-man, not-mother, not-whore) whilst man will always be 'un', in keeping with Beauvoir's view. Central to Beauvoir's argument is the notion that women are culturally determined to adopt an object-status within society. While Man is the universal Subject, women are forced to inhabit a negative sphere of existence since their identity is culturally defined only as being 'not-man'. For this reason, women are always only socially enabled to perceive of themselves as Other; that is, other than Man.<sup>260</sup> Thus, women are socially deprived of accessing subjective agency – what Sartre termed *being for-itself* ('pour-soi') – and their identity gains meaning only as that which is not-something/someone-else – *being in-*

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<sup>260</sup> Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

*itself* ('en-soi').<sup>261</sup> In short, woman is socially constructed to inhabit a negative space that prevents her from existing as a subject *for-herself*. Arcan also perceives the feminine condition as a universal condition of relative negativity and dehumanisation, and one through which women exist on the margins of a patriarchal society for the benefit of male pleasure and social order, and thus devoid of their being 'pour-soi'.

There is thus no positive bridging between other women's experiences and Arcan's here, nor between sex and procreation as Huston suggests. Arcan refers to herself as sterile (which could well be false in literal terms given her abortion narrated in *Folle* [chapter one]), and claims that 'tout le sperme du monde n'arriverait pas à éveiller quoi que ce soit en moi.' (23) She also alludes to the idea that her past as a prostitute renders her incapable of becoming a mother, as is clear in the following quotation:

mon corps qui pourrait porter l'enfant de toutes les nations, et ça servira à quoi pensez-vous, cette manière de multiplier les coïts comme si c'était là le but de la vie [...] j'aurais pris toute une vie pour réussir cet exploit, quitter un millier d'hommes, oublier leur nom le temps de sortir du lit. (*Putain* 59)

Arcan's take on biological determinism is thus far more negative than Huston's (and Huston herself is careful to pinpoint Arcan's particularly nihilistic mindset in 'Arcan, Philosophe').<sup>262</sup> This stream of consciousness – emphasised by automatic writing and fragmented syntax structure – destabilises the order of this passage and figuratively depicts her body dissipating through the multiple 'coïts', as she melts into air becoming herself a 'poupée d'air' (19). The degeneration of the narrative form is evidence not of Arcan's deficient prose then, as some critics have claimed, but rather (as Tremblay-Devirieux asserts) of a mirroring between the central theme of degeneration in Arcan's work and the language she employs,<sup>263</sup> the narrative voice's words unravelling towards a less hopeful end. Arcan's conception of the universal feminine condition is thus anti-generational, and fatalistically rejects the possibility of progress.

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<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> Huston, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>263</sup> Tremblay-Devirieux, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that women in this work respond to their shared subordination not with collective retaliation, but by competing fiercely amongst themselves. Arcan's references to competition range from the pornographic cliché (such as Arcan vying with fellow prostitutes for attention mid-threesome [149]) to the dangerously hyperbolic (a literary technique of exaggeration which she admits to in *Tout le monde en parle* [chapter four]).<sup>264</sup> Halfway through *Putain*, she claims never to have been raped on the way to school, but feels jealous rather than relieved. Unlike other girls, she writes, 'je n'ai jamais su pousser les hommes à ne plus pouvoir se retenir' (90). She also imagines her friends being deformed, burned and carcinogenic (92-93), and describes her anorexia as a means of differentiating herself from other women (93). These scenes of sadomasochism and inter-female violence recall Cixous' distress in naming the biggest crime committed against women: teaching them to hate one another and themselves.<sup>265</sup>

### **Dangerous Mythologies**

The origins of this dismal feminine condition are not clear-cut, being determined by a combination of factors. At the very least, it is not *singularly* borne of instinctual drives, which Arcan confirms in an interview with Mélikah Abdelmoumen:

Cette exigence de captation vient de l'intérieur des femmes, elle est en quelque sorte inhérente à la féminité, mais elle est surtout nourrie par un commandement social répété à travers le foisonnement des images sexuelles commerciales, qui deviennent un impératif, la seule façon d'être.<sup>266</sup>

For one thing, women's sexual identity is shown by Arcan to be socially constructed rather than innate given its performative character, as alluded to in *Putain* when the narrative voice asks 'pourquoi est-ce que les voix que j'entends sont toujours des voix de femmes [?]' (180), replying: 'sans doute parce que les hommes n'ont pas besoin de se donner en spectacle.' (180) She claims that when women scream at the point of orgasm, 'c'est aux femmes que les femmes mentent.' (183) Where the gendered structures of this type of performance originate, however, is "a" mystery to the young Arcan. She quotes her (fictional) self saying 'mais maman pourquoi est-ce

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<sup>264</sup> Lepage, *op. cit.*

<sup>265</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>266</sup> Mélikah Abdelmoumen, "Liberté, féminité, fatalité": Cyberentretien avec Nelly Arcan', *Spirale*, 215 (2007), 34-36 (p. 34).

que je ne peux pas voir papa tout nu et pourquoi lui peut-il te voir toute nue' (183), as an example of 'des questions auxquelles je n'ai jamais eu de réponse.' (183) This rhetorical question begs the question as to where women's object status derives from. This ambiguity resolves itself, as I will now explain, throughout this work and *Burqa de chair*.

Fairytales are a particularly effective medium when it comes to normalising women's image status. As Arcan summarises: 'tous les hommes sont bossus ou grenouilles dans les contes de fées, ils n'ont que leur désir pour séduire ces femmes qui ne sont jamais grenouilles ni bossues mais toujours les plus belles' (105). Whilst men can attract women in spite of their deformities, 'l'infirmité ne pardonne pas chez les femmes' (105). These 'contes de fées' thus present girls in their infancy with an inflexible truth: 'La beauté royaume. La laideur exil' (*Burqa* 43). Arcan attests to the influence of Christian doctrine, moreover, on women's social image in *Putain*. Like Huston, Arcan references biblical imagery, such as that of Eve (hyper-sexualised) and Mary (unsexed) to reveal the origins of the Madonna-whore complex, adding an allusion to Lot's wife and the pillar of salt<sup>267</sup> to reaffirm the association of original sin with the feminine condition (71-72). Arcan then narrates a story from her past – her first remembered sin – to indicate the extent to which religious orthodoxy and common expectations of women come to inform her perception of her own sexual identity: 'il m'avait surprise nue avec un garçon qui cherchait du bout des doigts un point entre mes jambes, j'avais les yeux fermés d'avoir mal et c'est à ce moment de ne plus vouloir que j'ai entendu la voix de mon père [...] ce jour-là c'était la fête des mères' (72). The thematic function of this quotation is threefold. Firstly, it serves to highlight the irony of religious orthodoxy. Why should Arcan have referred to this as her sin, when the *boy* touched *her*, and when *she* wanted *him* to stop? This quotation thus serves to demonstrate the extent to which women internalise the assimilation between female sexual experience and sin, whether that be perpetrated by the woman or man (women's sexual experience – be it solicited or not – is always women's fault). Secondly, it is evident that the father walking in at the exact moment Arcan wanted the boy to stop could be said to

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<sup>267</sup> Genesis, 19. 15-26. *Holy Bible*, King James Version (London: Collins, 2011) Upon the destruction of Sodom, God commands that Lot and his party (some of 'the women, and the people') move on without looking back. Lot's wife glances back and turns into a pillar of salt.

reinforce the oedipal foundations of the narrative. Thirdly, the fact that Arcan's first sexual sin (or awakening) happened on Mother's Day attaches the religious imagery to the Madonna-whore complex, Arcan being whore and her mother Madonna. Arcan is also careful to reference biblical narratives later in *Putain* to indicate the extent to which whores are not only vilified by men, but encouraged by men to become so. Abraham and Noah, for instance, prefer prostitutes to their wives (Arcan's words not mine), and honoured God through their 'putasserie' (111-112). The biblical narrative about the need to bear a child central to Abraham's story obviously fails to convince Arcan,<sup>268</sup> and she puts forward her sense of injustice in no uncertain terms: 'quelle sorte de dieu es-tu pour pousser les hommes dans les bras de leur servante et pour laisser les servantes faire la putain [...] ?' (112) Arcan is thus evidently indignant about a system that encourages women to be whores and vilifies them for the same reason.

The beauty industry too, as in *A Ciel ouvert*, is shown in *Putain* to inform women's societal apperception and to consolidate the same Madonna-whore divide favoured in biblical parables (29). Arcan writes about women in magazines in the following way:

il y a bien la pile de magazines que je ne lis pas, achetés par l'agence et posés là sur la table de chevet pour le divertissement des putains, des magazines exprès pour moi, détailler de jeunes adolescentes à moitié nues qui me regardent de leur bouche entrouverte à tour de pages ne me divertit pas, elles me font peur, plutôt les retourner face contre la terre, plutôt arracher la couverture où jouit cambrée la schtroumpfette en chef, l'employée du mois encerclée de slogans stupides, toujours les mêmes, spécial sexe, tout sur le sexe, comme s'il ne suffisait pas de le faire tout le temps [...] il faudrait les émietter [...] mais ça ne sert à rien car elles sont trop nombreuses, d'autres magazines seront empilés au même endroit la semaine prochaine [...] il me faut donc les laisser à leurs quinze ans et leur perfection de bouche entrouverte, à leur royaume de postures affolantes. (29)

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<sup>268</sup> Genesis, 16. 1-16. *Holy Bible*. Sarah (Sarai) could not provide a child for Abraham (Abram), so she advised that he should conceive a child with her Egyptian slave girl Hagar instead. Hagar gave birth to Abraham's child, Ishmael, which was the will of God.

It is therefore clear that gender inequality and the Madonna-whore divide is not, according to Arcan, born out of a void or from instinct; it is a self-fulfilling prophecy fed by the media, beauty and sex industries (chapter one). Arcan's destruction of the magazines is a futile activity, since the pile will be perpetually replenished, as will the arrival of younger more beautiful women on the sexual scene as Arcan's future competitors. The reference to 'd'autres magazines [qui] seront empilés au même endroit la semaine prochaine' is an analogy of the eternal pile of women who are favoured as sexual objects before being rejected and replaced by a newer, improved model. In fact, as Delvaux remarks in her response to Berger's theory and Arcan's corpus, 'on ne sait plus distinguer la femme de l'image', so much so that 'l'image-artifice, l'image-vêtement, l'image-peau [...] rend la chair obsolète.'<sup>269</sup> Yet if Arcan presents women's hyper-sexualisation and subsequent desexualisation as an eternally recurring pattern, there is markedly no sign of Huston's universal and quasi-utopian vision of female temporality. The degeneration of language occurs here again through the syntactic and structural fragmentation, which visually emulates the narrative voice's despair and pre-empts Arcan's own deteriorating mental health and eventual suicide (chapters one and four). What is presented here is not a positive embracing of the eternal return (as with Nietzsche's *amor fati*<sup>270</sup>) but a reluctant acceptance, immortalised in this macabre text. The word 'émietter', for instance, when she talks about tearing up the magazines, brings our attention to the fact that the statements here-cited cannot be torn up in the same way. The cycle must continue, fed by an eternal stock of stories, be that during children's bedtime, at the pulpit or in Vogue.

Most dangerously of all, these unequal gender structures founded within narratives of female beauty come to be colonised by the male-dominated sex industry, supported by neo-liberal ideology. Men in *Putain* base their mistreatment of women on a false rhetoric of rights: the one-way ethics of a capitalist market. This

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<sup>269</sup> Martine Delvaux, 'Ecriture et nudité. Les Femmes de Nelly Arcan et de Vanessa Beecroft', *Tangence* (103), 79-91 (p. 80).

<sup>270</sup> *Amor fati* is the notion that one should learn to love one's fate, including moments of suffering and loss, as a positive mode of acceptance (unlike acceptance as a mode of resistance in Arcan's *Folle* [chapter one]). See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Book 4', in *The Gay Science*, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

is made evident in the following passage, about Arcan's friend and fellow prostitute Monita:

il m'a parlé de Monita qui était à côté de ce qu'elle aurait dû être pour lui plaire, et pendant une heure j'avais envie de crier de quel droit, comment oses-tu parler d'une femme de cette façon alors que tu es si laid, si gros, et comme s'il avait deviné mes pensées il m'a dit que oui, qu'il était peut-être gros mais qu'après tout c'était lui qui payait, c'était lui le client, il avait bien le droit d'avoir des attentes [...] qu'au fond ce n'était pas différent de voir un film dont on ne nous a dit que du bien, et là-dessus j'ai su que je n'allais plus jamais aimer qu'on me trouve jolie, non, même lorsqu'on me choisit et qu'on me préfère à une autre [...]. (158)

In short, what the male client thought he was entitled to owing to a monetary payment, Arcan alludes to as an unjustified form of dehumanisation. Capitalist structures thus go a long way in reifying the position of women as sexualised objects, and in legitimising male domination (since, in this scenario at any rate, it is men who pay). This is opposed to the Marxist argument of Despentès, who perceives financial gain through prostitution to be relatively easy and beneficial, and takes it as her basis for critiquing a patriarchal schema: in her view, it is because women stand to make such vast sums of money from the industry that prostitution remains illegal (chapter one).<sup>271</sup> In Arcan's opinion, however, financial remuneration is by no means envisaged as a positive aspect of sex work. In both *Burqa de chair* (59) and *Putain* (61), as with the narrative voice of *Folle* (chapter one), Arcan spends the money she earns as a mode of purification: removing the evidence of her time with her clients. Money thus fails to provide her with a substantial form of retribution. Crucially, Despentès and Arcan conceive of capital very differently, as well as its relation to prostitutes' disempowerment. In Despentès' opinion, prostitutes are oppressed by the fact that prostitution's illegality prevents them from earning as much capital as they could from clients, whereas from Arcan's point of view, it is clear that prostitution is oppressive to prostitutes full-stop (whether legalised or not) because it turns women into buyable commodities. This then disempowers women in the industry who, like Monita, find themselves evaluated in accordance with the value codes of the market, leading to unhealthy competition with other prostitutes (and with a mythical other;

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<sup>271</sup> Virginie Despentès, *King Kong théorie* (Paris : Grasset, 2006), pp. 20 and 85-86.

the unattainable ‘ce qu’elle aurait du être’). In short, prostitution according to Arcan devalues and dehumanises women, and no amount of money can make that right. It is also indicative of a more broadly unjust system, described by Brown as ‘une pratique universelle permettant à des hommes (proxénètes) de vendre en toute impunité des femmes (marchandises sexuelles) à d’autres hommes (acheteurs de services sexuels).’<sup>272</sup> The valuation of women based on their looks, moreover, and their limited sense of self-worth, is shown to be anything but natural, being upheld by numerous misogynist discourses (literary, religious, mediatised and financial).

### **Playing on Oedipal Theory**

Arcan undermines oedipal theory just as she does the above ideologies and essentialist theory, by satirising it to the point of hyperbole, her family unit being a paragon of the Freudian oedipal triangle.<sup>273</sup> Arcan’s mother is referred to as a *larve* (Arcan’s term for the desexualised maternal figure, to be discussed shortly along with the *schtroumpfette*), and her father plays the same signifying role for her male clients. Arcan claims in *Putain* that she sleeps with her father indirectly during intercourse with other men: ‘je baise avec lui à travers tous ces pères qui bandent dans ma direction.’ (33). In addition, Arcan states in ‘L’Enfant dans le miroir’ that as her mother’s body loses its youthful shape, her father starts to look to Arcan to resurrect what his wife has lost (83-84): Arcan as daughter comes to replace the figure of the mother. Arcan’s depiction of herself as a Lolita figure plays on the idea that all men are attracted to younger women (16 and 43), and exaggerates the Freudian view that women compete with their mothers for the love of their father after a latency period during adolescence. Freud upheld the notion that women came to replace their original oedipal love for their mother with love of their father. He based this view on the premise that, to overcome penis-envy resulting from the clitoris’ inferior size, women would aspire to replace their desire for a penis with a

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<sup>272</sup> Anne Brown, ‘Une Lecture sociologique de *Putain* ou la démythification de la femme corps-sexe’, *Québec Studies*, 41 (2006), 63-82 (p. 64).

<sup>273</sup> Elena Prus proposes that the key protagonist’s mother and father in *Putain* act as archetypes of men and women. Elena Prus, “‘Scandaleusement intime’ : *Putain* de Nelly Arcan”, in *Parcours québécois : Introductions à la littérature du Québec*, ed. by Pierre Morel (Chisinau: Cartier, 2007), pp. 208-216 (p. 214).



baby which their father (not their mother) could provide them with.<sup>274</sup> Indications of an oedipal relationship between Arcan and her father, such as the one below, are to be interpreted with a sense of irony according to her father in real life.<sup>275</sup>

[...] plus on le veut moins on le doit, tout comme mon père et moi nous allons claquer la porte l'un sur l'autre d'autant plus fort que nous savions qui se tenait derrière, car nous avons imaginé de mille manières la rencontre de nos deux sexes inabordables et pourtant si familiers. (54)

The oedipal model, for one thing, is referred to by Freud as being meshed within our subconscious libidinal drives, not as an outward manifestation of erotic charge between father and daughter as it is here. Freudian imagery is used figuratively to reinforce social ideals of femininity, principally that of youthful good looks (chapter one) which splits women up into two camps – young and old, sexy and unsexy, *larve* and *schtroumpfette* – to be judged accordingly by all men (metonymically connoted by the father figure).

Arcan also discredits oedipal theory by highlighting its mimetic structure, as illustrated towards the end of *Putain*:

il n'y a rien à pardonner car la vie est ainsi faite, le reste n'est que lâcheté et jalousie, alors mieux vaut se [...] remplir la tête de scénarios de triomphe et d'honneur et fermer les yeux sur la vie qui passe, celle des voisins qui baisent en jouissant d'être entendus et de leurs enfants qui entrent sur la pointe des pieds dans la chambre. (179)

This scene reflects the cyclical nature of sexual practice and denies that it is biologically determined. The neighbours perform their sexual *jouissance* – their pleasure arises from being seen and heard –, and the reference to children's voyeurism infers a mimetic recreation of this performance a generation on, reminding us of the influence of normative social structures on psychosexual development. It is also interesting to note the choice of the term 'voisins' in this

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<sup>274</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey and ed. by Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 320-321, 340 and 348.

<sup>275</sup> Claudia Larochelle, *Je veux une maison faites de sorties de secours : Réflexions sur la vie et l'œuvre de Nelly Arcan*, ed. by Claudia Larochelle (Montréal : VLB Éditeur, 2015), p. 80.

primal scene (*Urszene*).<sup>276</sup> The nuclear family network remains, with the children spying on their parents, but the reference to neighbours makes this nucleus a little less neat. It is opened up to hint at a wider social system where everybody is performing sex. What we have here is a dystopian model of Jeffrey Weeks' *pornocopia* where everybody has sex all the time (chapter four), and Arcan thus provides her own alternative to oedipal theorisations of sexual development. In her equally cyclical version, sexual development is understood to be informed by social as well as familial structures, and a human pattern of sexual performance makes for a place where everyone is having sex, in ever the same unequal way.

### ***Larve-schtroumpfette***

Central to Arcan's depiction of oedipal theory is the *larve-schtroumpfette* dichotomy, which merits closer attention owing to its connection to abjection. A *schtroumpfette* is a female character introduced within *Les Schtroumpfs* (The Smurfs), a Belgian cartoon series created by Pierre Culliford (alias Peyo) where small blue men in Phrygian caps live in a community together, usually depicting an archetype of human behaviour with adjectival names to match (such as grumpy or jokey). The author's choice of the term *schtroumpfette* derives from the notion of one smurf woman (a smurfette) existing within a world of male smurfs, meaning that she is deprived of her being *pour-soi* and of her individualism because she only exists as Woman for the male community of smurfs.<sup>277</sup> Further, Culliford's smurfette was created by the sorcerer Gargamel, in an attempt to cause havoc amongst the smurfs. Later, Papa Smurf gives her a makeover – dyeing her hair blonde, lengthening her eyelashes and remodelling her nose – and the smurfs subsequently compete to win her affection. They turn against one another in the process, thereby

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<sup>276</sup> Freud's take on the *urszene* is a violent one, suggesting that children seeing two parents having sex would assume their mother was being abused. Freud, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-200. The *urszene* is by definition not-visible as it refers to the child's conception, and can only be constructed fantasmatically. As such, it remains a fantasy and a fiction.

<sup>277</sup> Aurélia Aurita, 'Author Reading and Q+A with Aurélia Aurita', paper presented at *Overstepping the Boundaries*.

finalising Gargamel's evil intent. The smurfette thus signifies a man-made model of femininity, formed to fit men's desires.<sup>278</sup>

The potentially comical aspect of talking of smurfs in existential terms takes on a sinister tone in this novel, as Arcan shows us the demoralising lessons that can be drawn from this seemingly innocent animation. Arcan re-appropriates the term *schtroumpfette* to mean a hyper-sexualised and attractive female figure who is able to pool male desire, the very reverse of the *larve* figure who is wholly desexualised and, in the case of Arcan's works, inevitably comes to symbolise the sexless mother. In *Putain*, Arcan's father comes to stand in for all men, and Arcan and her mother for the *schtroumpfette* and *larve* respectively. When Arcan speaks of her clients, she says she had sex with her father through them, and when she transforms her body through plastic surgery and enters the sex industry, she does so to remain young and desirable and to thus differentiate herself as diametrically as possible from her mother.<sup>279</sup> One must then either adhere to the figure of the *schtroumpfette* to solicit the father's desire, or be relegated to the role of *larve* and lose his attention altogether. In neither case is a woman granted full subjectivity *pour-soi*, in being only not-man or object-for-man, in keeping with Beauvoir's views on the feminine condition.<sup>280</sup> As Huston puts it in 'Arcan, Philosophe' in reference to this dual phenomenon, 'Peu importe le nom : toujours, les femmes sont dédoublées, scindées, schizoïdes, tandis que l'homme reste un' (chapter one).<sup>281</sup>

Huston believes the *larve-schtroumpfette* dichotomy to be synonymous with the Madonna-whore complex which, in my opinion, overlooks subtle differences. The *larve* figure cannot be conflated with that of the Madonna, since a *larve* belongs to the animal kingdom, and is a material creature rather than a symbolic construct. Moreover, the *larve* carries new, as of yet unformed insect life, and hence exists in an in-between space between being and not-being. On some level then, the *larve*'s existential condition inverts that of the corpse, the archetypal abject figure according

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<sup>278</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the *schtroumpfette* figure within the context of *Les Schtroumpfs* and Arcan's work, as well as the relationship between them, see: Martine Delvaux, 'Les Hommes de Nelly Arcan', in *Nelly Arcan*, pp. 243-257 (pp. 247-249).

<sup>279</sup> Huston, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>280</sup> Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>281</sup> Huston, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

to Kristeva (incidentally, *larve* comes from *larva* meaning ghost [chapter one]<sup>282</sup>).<sup>283</sup> The *larve* figure therefore fails to meet the criteria of the Madonna who exists as a fixed category of being. Likewise, the *schtroumpfette* is not analogous with the whore, since the *schtroumpfette* is not sexualised in the original Smurf cartoon. The metaphor is thus more complex than Huston suggests: the *schtroumpfette*, as a metonym of the female sex, is both Madonna and whore (thanks to Arcan's inflexion), yet also represents women as asexual. Tremblay-Devirieux was thus correct in equating the *larve* figure to the abject in her thesis, as she was to represent the 'Putain' as socially abjected, yet I would suggest that the *schtroumpfette* is abjected to a further level in being not quite Madonna or whore (as Arcan herself as writer and prostitute), and thus eliding any fixed category. For this reason, it seems to me that the *larve-schtroumpfette* dichotomy is twice removed from the Madonna-whore complex. If Kristeva and later abject theorists referred to the figure of the Madonna (particularly the mother) and whore as socially abject figures, the *larve* and *schtroumpfette* are all the more so since they belie even these categories of being, and are thus abjected to an additional degree. In complexifying categories in this way, Arcan as *schtroumpfette* also personifies Cixous' positive conceptualisation of the Medusa as she who cannot be pinned down and defined absolutely: 'Elle ne tient pas en place, elle déborde.'<sup>284</sup> Both spill over normative categories of being within the symbolic order.

This is nowhere shown more clearly than in her essay 'La Honte' in which Arcan narrates her experiences on the television show *Tout le monde en parle*. For this interview, Arcan wore a tight black Dolce & Gabbana dress with a low plunging neckline, which solicited the unwanted and, arguably, unwarranted attention of the panellists (all white males, with more than a little irony). The language employed in this section presents Arcan as the ultimate sinner and saviour, the abject and the sublime, in accordance with Kristeva's biblical analyses in '...Qui tollis peccata

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<sup>282</sup> Michel Peterson, 'Nelly me tangere', *Revue santé mentale au Québec*, 21.2 (2012), 127-142 (p. 139).

<sup>283</sup> The corpse's abject effect consists in reminding living beings that they will one day die, thereby reinforcing the fact that they are, for now, still alive. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 11.

<sup>284</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

mundi' (who takes away the sins of the world).<sup>285</sup> On the one hand, she is vilified because of her highly sexualised attire. On that basis, she symbolises 'la tentation féminine' which as Kristeva underlines is represented through the biblical figure of Eve as the root of all sin (chapter four).<sup>286</sup> Mercédès Baillargeon discerns that the media's vilification of Arcan boiled down not simply to who she was, but the fact that 'elle les attaquait directement pour leur rôle dans l'hypersexualisation des femmes.'<sup>287</sup> On the other hand, she is described as a Christ-like figure, Arcan alluding to the crucifixion. She looks in the mirror in the days following the interview, placing her arms out like Jesus on the cross (97). She deploys Jesus' message in John 8<sup>288</sup> when she refers to the interviewers' comments as stones and describes herself as failing to 'se tenir droite sous les pierres lancées, depuis la grandeur sacrée de l'officier, sur son corps emputassé.' (96) Through this biblical imagery, Arcan acts as her own saviour, washing her sins away. In the same move, she draws attention to the sins of men and to the injustices within a patriarchal system: whilst women's hyper-sexualisation is forced onto women by the media, it is paradoxically condemned and women are criminalised for adhering to common conventions of beauty and appealing to the male gaze. This constitutes the primary paradox of the feminine condition for Arcan. This is clearly expounded through the views of Arcan's friend Caroline, for whom the problem is not Arcan's dress, but her body which is constructed through plastic surgery (99). The fact that she was publicly humiliated for what she herself created intensifies her shame (99). This is equal to the transparency issue brought to light in *A Ciel ouvert*: the more women try to appear beautiful, the more their efforts form an opaque shell, like a mask or burqa, and the act of pretence thus falls through (chapter one).

That which is most significant for our argument is Arcan's position as abject in the given scene, in so far as her 'décolleté' betrays Arcan's persona of 'Putain'

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<sup>285</sup> 'Le péché reste alors la seule marque de la différence d'avec la sublimité du Christ.'  
Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>287</sup> Mercédès Baillargeon, 'Médias, hypersexualisation, et mise en scène de soi : Le Pari dangereux de Nelly Arcan', *Québec Studies*, 63 (2017), 9-28 (p. 21).

<sup>288</sup> John, 8. 1-12. *Holy Bible*. A group of scribes and Pharisees brought an adulterous woman to Jesus, at a Temple on the Mount of Olives. Jesus looked up and said, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.' No one went ahead, so Jesus said to her 'Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.'

even whilst she endeavours to present herself as a philosopher and author. The men are not threatened by her appearance and remain confident in their verdict as the judges of the show (95, 97 and 104). On the contrary, they perceive her abject 'Putain' status as a sign of *her* vulnerability, 'le point ombilical de sa honte' (97). In narrating this scenario and assimilating her position to that of Jesus, however, she challenges her position as abject by appealing to her innocent status and presents the male panellists as the perpetrators. It is they whose sins need addressing. Her decision to translate this lived experience into poetic language in 'La Honte' also enables her to reinforce her position as philosopher and author: the intended but failed purpose of her appearance on *Tout le monde en parle*. It is this literary move which makes her abject on two counts, as 'Putain', and as not-quite 'Putain' or philosopher; as sinner and saviour; abject and sublime; occupying a liminal state of being (chapter one). This position makes her all the more abject, and it is that which is so unsettling for the panellists and readers more generally. Indeed, where the panellists denigrated Arcan with confidence during *Tout le monde en parle*, Guy Lepage's response to 'La Honte' (when first published as a newspaper entry) was one of apology and consternation.<sup>289</sup>

Huston infers this abject position when she says that Arcan is a philosopher as well as a prostitute, duly reinforced by the title of her introduction. Huston explains that this means Arcan questions her clients as well as satisfying them sexually.<sup>290</sup> She asks them about their daughters and wives, and what they would think about them undertaking the same role as her. Without exception, they were never prepared for them to do so (*Putain* 108). Arcan professes her anger at their hypocrisy, writing 'que faites-vous ici dans cette chambre à me jeter du sperme au visage alors que vous ne voudriez pas que votre fille en reçoive à son tour, alors que devant elle vous parlez votre sale discours d'homme d'affaires' (108). Where her clients fail to conceive of their wives and daughters, and of a paid prostitute, as being of the same type, Arcan struggles to accept the disjuncture between her clients' ordinary personas as fathers and businessmen, and those as her clients.<sup>291</sup> In this sense, the male clients as well as Arcan do not fit easily into social categories: they

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<sup>289</sup> Arcand, *op. cit.*

<sup>290</sup> Huston, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

are fathers and clients. On the flip side, she is asking them to recognise her humanity and both facets of her *schtroumpfette* identity: as somebody's daughter and a prostitute.

### 3 Mirror-Stages

Arcan is keen to rebuff phallogocentric theory in 'L'Enfant dans le Miroir', which Huston terms Arcan's first lesson on materialism.<sup>292</sup> This essay also serves to dismantle a determinist argument since it distinctly highlights female obsession with appearance as something that evolves over time and thus, one would deduce, through cultural assimilation rather than innate practice. Arcan begins by saying that, 'Quand j'étais petite je me voyais peu, je n'avais pas le temps.' (69) The way she describes her first experiences in front of the mirror as a child attests to her innocence and to her ignorance in terms of male desire:

je m'adressais la plupart du temps une grimace. C'était le bon temps de la beauté non faite de canons, la beauté non imprégnée du sexe des hommes, celui de la facétie, de l'autodérision où l'on se trouve à son aise devant les traits de son visage qui deviendront un jour ingrats ; c'était le temps où ça fait plaisir de s'enlaidir, pour rire ; c'était le temps d'avant la dramatisation du visage où tout est à remodeler ; le temps d'avant le temps de l'aimantation, du plus grand sérieux de la capture des hommes. (69)

Puberty serves as the temporal benchmark for Arcan's transformation, when she starts to look at herself in the mirror as a piece of *charcuterie* (and thus from a narcissistic, phallogocentric perspective in adherence to what Cixous says of male sexuality):

C'est une fois devenue grande que les miroirs me sont arrivés en pleine face et que devant eux je me suis stationnée des heures durant, m'épluchant jusqu'à ce qu'apparaisse une charcuterie tellement creusée qu'elle en perdait son nom. À force de se regarder on finit par voir son intérieur, son moi profond, sa véritable nature, on arrêterait peut-être de parler de son âme, de son cœur et de son esprit, on parlerait plutôt de poids et de masse, de texture et de couleur, on parlerait de la terre, on en finirait avec nos affinités avec le

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

ciel et nos aptitudes à s'envoler, on cesserait peut-être de se croire immortels.

(74)

The reference to charcuterie and death correlates with the imagery of butchery in *A Ciel ouvert*, but where the beauty, media and sex industries were shown to be responsible in that novel there is no final consensus given here. The only clear message given is that there is nothing beyond bodily materiality for women, their 'véritable nature'. Arcan also overcomes Cartesian dualism and spiritual ascendance central to the male-dominated philo-literary tradition, where the 'âme', 'esprit' and 'cœur' were favoured over the material body.<sup>293</sup> This focus on materiality recalls Chawaf and Huston's objectives for *écriture féminine*, which Arcan employs to critique patriarchal norms which reduce women to their bodily identity.

This is conveyed through the loaded symbol of the mirror which emphasises women's relegation to the role of image. The mirror stage as Lacan saw it occurs on a subconscious, prelinguistic level, and is a case of seeing oneself as object before recognising oneself as subject.<sup>294</sup> Arcan plays on this mirror stage, making it relevant to the phases of early child- and teenagehood, and switching around the terms proper to it. She first identifies as subject (as a child sticking her tongue out) before consciously cutting herself open and examining herself as object and abject, since Arcan's butchered body in this passage recalls the figure of the corpse and, as Tremblay-Devirieux has highlighted, Lacan's 'corps démorcelé'.<sup>295</sup> This is in keeping with Cixous' view that women are taught to become abject figures to themselves.<sup>296</sup> Furthermore, Arcan sees herself as object and abject figure to gratify an internalised male gaze, which operates in relation to the primary signifier, the phallus (as with the penis/magnifying glass in *A Ciel ouvert* [chapter one]). As such, Arcan's narcissism here is a phallogentric model denigrated by Cixous, which Arcan's text shows reduces a woman necessarily to the position of object and abject.

In addition, this passage recalls Kristeva's psychoanalytic addition to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. Kristeva suggested that, whilst the mirror stage signalled a break between ourselves as object and subject, and between 'deux domaines

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<sup>293</sup> Prudence Allen, 'Man-Woman Complimentarity: The Catholic Inspiration', *Logos*, 9.3 (2006), 87-108 (p. 90).

<sup>294</sup> Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>295</sup> Tremblay-Devirieux, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>296</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 81.



hétérogènes: le sémiotique et le symbolique’,<sup>297</sup> the human individual already experiences themselves as other when they are separated from the mother at birth. Kristeva explains that we recognise ourselves as an ‘I’ by acknowledging that we are not our mother, and thus a separate entity in the world. According to Kristeva, this recognition happens within the space she names the semiotic *chora*, which serves as the receptacle of this first narcissistic moment’.<sup>298</sup> There is thus a non-phallic narcissism in play prior to the phallogocentric narcissism articulated by Lacan, one which works in relation to the mother not the phallus. In recalling this maternal mirror stage of Kristeva’s and the semiotic chora, Arcan’s work reflects the following statement by Cixous about *écriture féminine*: ‘Elle seule ose et veut connaître du dedans, dont elle, l’exclue, n’a pas cessé d’entendre résonner l’avant-langage.’<sup>299</sup> Arcan’s text brings us back to the semiotic order of ‘l’avant-langage’, to the maternal ‘dedans’, and to the first trauma of separation between self and (m)other.

This disjuncture between oneself as subject and object through the maternal body is problematised, however, by Arcan’s coming to awareness of herself as subject (the Lacanian mirror-stage) and object (looking at herself as a piece of charcuterie). There are thus three stages of self-recognition occurring in this scene which complicate Arcan’s coming to subjectivity: Arcan’s coming to subjectivity through separation from the mother, the coming to subjectivity through apperception of ourselves as subject in the mirror, and the feminine coming to objectivity. What causes this final mirror stage, moreover, is not directly expressed by Arcan, but the allusion to Lacanian and Kristevan mirror-stages suffice to refute biological causality. In addition, the symbol of the mirror is reminiscent of Walt Disney’s ‘magic mirror on the wall’, reminding us of Arcan’s critique of fairytales as false and oppressive mythologies. In so doing, Arcan marries psychoanalytic theory with social constructionist theory, and in presenting herself as abject to the reader draws attention to the constructed nature, in this case at least, of the borders of abjection. Furthermore, the meeting of subject formation central to psychosexual development according to Lacan and Kristeva, and women’s formation as objects through social

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<sup>297</sup> Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 46.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>299</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

constructionism reflects Arcan's *schtroumpfette* condition, and there is thus an implication that all women may be objectified as women and abjected as *schtroumpfette*, before eventually being abjected as *larves* and mothers. I have thus come full circle back to Arcan's nihilistic eternal recurrence of the feminine condition: a socially constructed one, on my account, which Arcan mirrors via satirical hyperbole in *Putain* and *Burqa de chair*.

### **Conclusion**

Arcan's portrayal of the feminine condition and psychosexual development does not, therefore, marry neatly with conventional oedipal theory nor with Huston's biological determinist position. Arcan may be fatalistic in her portrayal of the feminine condition – as something eternally recurring – but this is not owing to naturally occurring factors but to socially constructed norms, and to socially-conscious sexual performance. In addition, the universal feminine condition presented by Arcan is quite the reverse of Huston's positive, maternal model, presenting us with an anti-generational version in which women are fated to be abject, as well as objects and victims of the Madonna-whore complex as Huston contends. Arcan also indicates the extent to which feminine identity is falsely conditioned by mythologies circulated in magazines and fairytales, and through religion and neoliberal discourse. Arcan is equally keen to highlight the falsity of psychoanalytic and particularly oedipal theory and that of the Lacanian mirror-stage, by satirising it to the point of hyperbole. Arcan thus reinvents fictions of sexual difference to overturn them (contrary to the views of Tremblay-Devirieux and Huston). This is aided by the nuancing of female abject figures, through the layered portrait of the *schtroumpfette* and tripartite mirror-stage. In sum, though gender norms are presented as parts of a universal and ahistorical condition, the possibility of subverting them is implied (although not exactly executed) in *Burqa de chair* and *Putain*, through the recognition of their social construction and the layering of abjection. Arcan establishes the possibility of interrupting the eternal recurrence, even whilst attesting to it (using hyper-conformity as counter-narrative [chapter one]). Beneath and indeed through Arcan's nihilism, one catches a peek of Arcan's own laughing Medusa with its tongue sticking out, whilst she holds up a mirror to the feminine condition. In so doing, however, Arcan's Medusa succeeds not in freezing and killing the feminine condition, but in reflecting her own shackles. In the

next chapter, I will explore how Arcan's chains – namely her suffering as prostitute and porn-star – prevent her from narrating the suffering of others, even whilst producing a powerful testimonial of sex workers' conditions.

### Conclusion

It is evident that Huston, Ernaux and Arcan all reject traditional sexual difference theory to some degree, and paradoxically exploit it to their and women's advantage. For Ernaux, sexual difference is not innate, but we do embody social norms. In Ernaux's earlier works *Les Armoires vides*, *La Femme gelée* and *L'Évènement*, the female characters conceive of their working-class womanhood as shameful, and the Madonna-whore complex is shown to affect women differently depending on their class background. In Ernaux's later erotic triad (*Passion Simple*, *Se Perdre* and *L'Occupation*), she sublimates shame and defiantly embodies clichés of feminine erotic identity to subvert the Madonna-whore complex. Through writing, she thus comes to live her interstitial position between two class positions as an innovating one, that allows her to delegitimise social expectations surrounding women of working- and middle-class milieus alike. As for Huston, she offers two antithetical views of female sexuality. In *Reflets*, she argues that women exist either as hyper-sexualised objects or desexualised subjects, and that instinctive sexual practice stems from reproductive drives and works in the interest of men. In *L'Empreinte de l'ange* and *Une Adoration*, however, women adopt object and subject positions in sex, sex is presented as a liberating experience, emphasis is placed on a material, female temporality (like that described in *Professeurs de désespoir* and *Journal de la création*), and the narrators are keen to stress the plurality of female sexual identity and experience. This responds to Huston's demand in *Carnets*: to offer counter-narratives to our instinctive tendencies, pornography and the media. In the case of Arcan, her hyperbolic, fatalistic and psychoanalytic language subverts essentialist and oedipal structures, and her auto-abjection as *schtroumpfette* enables Arcan to reconfigure her shame as *putain* and to delegitimise borders of feminine abjection, as socially relative constructs. All three authors thus illustrate how women come to embody sexual difference (whether socially constructed as Ernaux and Arcan would have it, or socially and biologically informed as Huston believes). They then use these themes and motifs to unveil the mythical and detrimental character of sexual difference and its products (chiefly gender inequality, a phallic libidinal and financial

economy, the Madonna-whore complex, and women's sexual shame and abjection), and to propose a model of sexual difference that privileges a female not male sexuality. This female sexuality presented by Ernaux, Huston and Arcan is a pluralised one which stresses the materiality of sexual experience and Cixous' 'Amour-autre'.<sup>300</sup>

In the previous chapter, I argued that these authors reject and incorporate tropes from dominant sexual discourses, and I here explained on a similar basis how they reject and reinvent the concept of sexual difference to fit a more nuanced feminist agenda. In both cases, the outcome was a more heterogenous portrait of female sexuality. In the next chapter, I will examine this potential of women's writing for representing alterity, addressing Ernaux, Huston and Arcan's intersectional approach to portraying women's sexual identity, experience and development. I have so far established, moreover, that the studied authors perceive fixed definitions of feminine identity born out of patriarchal social conventions and phallogocentric discourse to be detrimental to and misrepresentative of women, but a collective conceptualisation of sexual difference based on a female sexuality to be liberating and counter-discursive. In the next chapter I will therefore need to establish how far this collective female sexuality's emancipatory appeal extends to all women, and whether alternate ways of experiencing womanhood owing to social, racial, national and cultural background can delegitimise the notion of a common sisterhood.

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<sup>300</sup>'L'Amour-autre c'est le prénom de l'écriture.' *Ibid.*, p. 139.

## Chapter 3

### Me, Myself and I: The Problem of Speaking for Others

Ernaux, Huston and Arcan embrace an intersectional type of feminism. Each of them deals with the ways in which women's subordination intersects with additional modes of marginalisation, taking into account race,<sup>301</sup> social status, sexuality and cultural background. They deflect a monolithic account of feminine sexual experience and identity, just as we saw them reject dominant sexual accounts in chapter one, and dualistic ones about sexual difference in chapter two. In addition, they recognise their own relative privilege as white, Western writers, and the problems involved with representing minority subjects, indicative of recent shifts in feminist thinking. White women are increasingly being called upon not just to recognise people of different races, nationalities and cultures but, inversely, to notice their own whiteness which so often goes unnoticed.<sup>302</sup> In her forthcoming work about the prospect of Ernaux's 'voix blanche', Thomas states that 'it is incumbent on white feminists to continue to identify and interrogate their privileges as white women and their ownership of the narratives of feminist history'.<sup>303</sup> Women of a certain social privilege, in particular, run the risk of misrepresenting others, or of imposing their own narrative viewpoint in their stead. As Linda Martín Alcoff asserts:

in both the practice of speaking for as well as the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are, based on my own situated interpretation.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Recalling the first proponents of intersectionality during feminism's third-wave. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour', in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, ed. by Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 175-200 (pp. 175-178).

<sup>302</sup> [Forthcoming] Lyn Thomas, 'Voix blanche? Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms and the Challenge of Intersectionality', in *Making Waves*, ed. by Margaret Atack and others (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2019), pp. 205-223 (pp. 208-209).

See especially Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>303</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>304</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', in 'alcoff.com' <<http://www.alcoff.com/content/speaothers.html>> [accessed 30 January 2015]

On the other hand, to avoid speaking for or about others ‘significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity’.<sup>305</sup> This tension between a recognition of responsibility, and the stagnation of effective action through fear of misrepresentation, is symptomatic of an ongoing debate amongst postmodern feminist scholars to which there are no easy answers.<sup>306</sup> Arcan, though, finds herself equally incapable of articulating other people’s suffering on account of her own social abjection (chapter two) and misrepresentation as prostitute and porn-star. She is thus more occupied with speaking for herself than for others, as a means of privileging and protecting her own story.

When it comes to literature, though, one wonders whether such ethical debates are necessary. Derrida considers literature exempt of censure and social responsibility, implying that it need answer to no-one (chapter two). Indeed, he writes that: ‘Cette autorisation de tout dire (qui va pourtant de pair avec la démocratie comme hyper-responsabilisation apparente du “sujet”) reconnaît un droit à la non-réponse absolue [...]’.<sup>307</sup> Ernaux, Huston and Arcan, however, reveal not just a palpable sense of responsibility but a desire for answers too, if not from the reader, then from other narrative voices within their literature. Their work is reflective of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorisation of speech in ‘Discourse in the Novel’: ‘Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other.’<sup>308</sup> In this chapter, I will explore dialogic discourse of this kind within not just the novel, but autobiographies too. I will explore literature’s capacity more broadly to encompass a polyphonic heteroglossia as Bakhtin understood it, and to subsequently reflect what feminist writer Marjolaine Deschênes terms ‘l’alterité d’autrui’<sup>309</sup> and that of the authors themselves.

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>306</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity, and Other Essays* (Maryland: Lanham, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>307</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Passions* (Paris : Galilée, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>308</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 1071-1106 (p. 1092).

<sup>309</sup> Marjolaine Deschênes, ‘Penser la création littéraire avec Paul Ricœur’, *Fabula / Les Colloques*, 2013 <<http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document1907.php>> [accessed 16 November 2014]

This chapter will thus concern itself with the issue of representing others' sexual experiences and identity, looking at how different literary styles and techniques lend themselves to an inclusive and intersectional mode of representation. Further, I will explore how my studied authors exploit their own situated subjectivity, by positing themselves as objects of analysis. I will begin with Ernaux's observation of others in her *journaux extimes*, *Journal du dehors*, *La Vie extérieure*, and *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, before establishing how the narrators speak to not for others in Huston's novels *Danse noire* and *Dolce agonie*. I will finish with a comparison of Arcan's narcissistic confessions in her autofictional work *Putain* and novel *Paradis, clef en main*. In each section, I will analyse a broad selection of minority and subaltern female figures, ranging from prostitutes to cleaners, exploring the ways in which their sexual experiences and identity are shaped in dramatically different ways according to their backgrounds, and how their inclusion in the selected texts resists the reader's pity and label of victim.

### 3.1 'Non-lieux' in Ernaux's *Journaux extimes*

Ernaux's triad of *journaux extimes*<sup>310</sup> (*Journal du dehors* [1993], *La Vie extérieure* [2000] and *Regarde les lumières mon amour* [2014]) is composed of her observations of the outside world. She comments on the lives of ordinary citizens in Paris and her city of residence, Cergy-Pontoise, which she praises for its multi-ethnic and multicultural demographic.<sup>311</sup> The chosen settings are remarkably banal: the metro, RER, commercial streets, and a hypermarket; 'non-lieux' par excellence to borrow Marc Augé's terminology.<sup>312</sup> The non-specificity of these spaces means that they are traversed by people of all walks of life, and Ernaux encounters women experiencing their bodies and sexual identities in vastly different ways. With such a large cast to choose from, Ernaux delimits her subjects to a select few, directing her attention primarily to those in distress as she invariably does. In an interview with Fort, she talks about a pregnant woman sent away from a bank, clearly in distress,

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<sup>310</sup> This term is that of Michel Tournier. Robin Tierney, "Lived Experience at the Level of the Body": Annie Ernaux's *Journaux extimes*, *Substance*, 35.3 (2006), 113-130 (p. 113).

<sup>311</sup> Lyn Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 219.

<sup>312</sup> See Marc Augé, *Non-lieux : Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris : Seuil, 1992).

and exclaims that ‘Des choses comme ça me font écrire.’<sup>313</sup> As Robin Tierney notes, moreover, both the beginning of *Journal du dehors* and ending to *La Vie extérieure* ‘feature women, in public, with bloodstains on the lower half of their bodies.’<sup>314</sup> We are never too far from the materiality of female sexual and corporeal experience. In this first chapter section, I will examine a range of these female figures and bodily episodes in Ernaux’s *journaux extimes*, especially minority ones, and how their representation is affected by a shift in narrative style. The *je transpersonnel* central to her corpus (chapters two and four) finds itself inverted in her *journaux extimes*, with the autobiographical gaze projected outside rather than inwards. I will explore this relationship between the autobiographical voice and subjects of study in Ernaux’s *journaux extimes*, and the ways in which it becomes complicated through sexual, racial and cultural difference. I will focus on sexual experience, desire and identity, as well as bodily presence in public spaces.

### ***Journal du dehors and La Vie extérieure***

Ernaux’s first *journal extime* to be published was *Journal du dehors* in which she sets her eyes on the humdrum of the everyday in hypermarkets, the RER and the commercial centre at *Ville Nouvelle* in Cergy-Pontoise. Ernaux’s recorded fascination with the outside world continued from then onwards, with Ernaux avidly narrating scenes in a private journal for the next seven years (1993-1999), producing *La Vie extérieure* and publishing it as a single volume at the turn of the millennium. In both these works, Ernaux’s aim is to transcribe what she observes exactly as it happened, without attempting to synthesise her observations, incorporating the stories in her work ‘pour eux-mêmes’.<sup>315</sup> She thus ‘avoids imposing her own interpretative grid on them’ and ‘positions herself as a photographer or reporter, not a story-teller’, to quote McIlvanney and Dierdre Doran Russell (chapter four).<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Annie Ernaux, ‘Entretien avec Pierre-Louis Fort’, in *Annie Ernaux. Un Engagement d’écriture*, ed. by Pierre-Louis Fort and Violaine Houdart-Merot (Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2015), pp. 201-207 (p. 207).

<sup>314</sup> Tierney, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>315</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Journal du dehors* (Paris : Gallimard, 1993), p. 84. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>316</sup> Siobhan McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001), p. 136., and Dierdre Doran Russell, ‘Narrative Identities in Contemporary



This is arguably an ethical addition to Bakhtin's analysis of the novel: where Bakhtin considered novelistic fiction capable of representing multiple voices through which the author's 'own voice must also sound', Ernaux endeavours to minimise the intrusion of her authorial voice (more so than elsewhere, Ernaux's aim in these works is to relay what she observes *as it had been* [chapter one]). Interestingly, however, the lives and voices of other people in these works teach us just as much if not more about the author and ourselves. It is for this reason that *Journal du dehors* opens with this epigraphic quotation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: 'Notre vrai moi n'est pas tout entier en nous.' This motto constitutes the *modus operandum* of this work and *La Vie extérieure*: to recognise the similitude between ourselves and others, and the ways we unwittingly shape each other's lives. In her analysis of Huston's literature Mary Gallagher asks: 'L'écriture romanesque n'est-elle pas chargée justement d'inscrire ou de représenter la pluralité des mois virtuels débordant l'instance unique qu'est censé être "le moi" ?'<sup>317</sup> Based on my reading of Ernaux, I hope to show that the autobiographical *journal intime* proves itself to be a valid polyphonic competitor to the novel.

### **Recognising and Bridging Difference**

This polyphonic approach to journal writing, however, and efforts towards a *neutre* narration, are not without their limits. Upon seeing a woman chewing gum in *Journal du dehors*, for example, Ernaux deduces that a man 'ne peut que l'imaginer lui cisailant le sexe et les couilles' (43). Through this assumption, according to Russell, she 'presumes a heterosexual gaze'<sup>318</sup> and, I would add, a normatively masculine, sexualised reading of the scene. In front of a lingerie shop, moreover, Ernaux states that she understands why prostitutes work in the sex industry: 'pour posséder ces choses-là' ; pour acheter quelque chose de beau et le ressentir contre sa peau (*Journal* 95). Ernaux's assimilation between herself as consumer and prostitute is at odds with Arcan's auto-fictional testimonies (chapters one and two). We know that Arcan purchases beautiful clothing not for the sake of beauty itself ('pour eux-

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French Autobiographical Literature and Film' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2008), p. 129.

<sup>317</sup> Mary Gallagher, 'Nancy Huston ou la relation proliférante', in *Vision/Division : L'Œuvre de Nancy Huston*, ed. by Marta Dvořák and Jane Koustas (Ottawa : Ottawa UP, 2004), pp. 23-35 (p. 27).

<sup>318</sup> Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

mêmes' as Ernaux might suggest), but to compete with other women when appealing to the male gaze and to be rid of the memory of sex with clients. Ernaux's desire to purchase an item to feel the clothes against her skin and, ultimately, that of a man against her, is diametrically opposed to Arcan's attempt to rid herself of the tactile memory of men's hands on her body, and this semantic opposition aptly illustrates the untenable divide between a bourgeois author and a woman who has 'trop vu' (chapter one). Ernaux also asks herself whether the public humiliation felt by a homeless person would be worse than the private shame of a prostitute, affirming that one needs to measure oneself against extreme forms of dereliction of that kind, 'comme s'il y avait une vérité qu'on ne puisse connaître qu'à ce prix.'<sup>319</sup> The implication being that Ernaux cannot comprehend such forms of degradation in real terms. On a corresponding basis, in *La Vie extérieure* Ernaux refers to the fourteen million victims of AIDS around the world though (40), as we learn from her erotic triptych, she is herself *séronégative* (chapter two).<sup>320</sup> Contrary to what the term *je transpersonnel* suggests therefore, the narrative voices of *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* accentuate the irreducible divisions between oneself and marginalised groups. Notably, between Ernaux – a white woman, honoured by the Parisian elite for her intellect and in good sexual health (chapters two and four) – and those who have lived abjection of a more debilitating type. This is substantiated by her take on Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky's affair: 'C'est l'histoire assez ordinaire d'un homme ordinaire, prudent, qui ne baise pas vraiment, par peur du sida ou par crainte d'être surpris.' (*La Vie* 118) Testing positive for HIV is thus what constitutes the difference between a little and too much sex, the banal and the abject, and Ernaux is safely on the side of the 'ordinaire'.

On the other hand, Ernaux forges links on a personal level with diverse subjects, based on her private memories. An affinity emerges, for instance, between Ernaux and a young pregnant girl whom she observes on a train, being insulted by her male peers and seeming to be 'dans un désert balayé par le vent' (*Journal* 71).

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<sup>319</sup> Ernaux, *La Vie extérieure* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), pp. 124-125. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>320</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Passion simple* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997), p. 54.  
Annie Ernaux, *L'Occupation* (Paris : Gallimard, 2002), p. 69.  
Annie Ernaux, *Se perdre* (Paris : Gallimard, 2003), p. 312.

Her isolation evokes that of Ernaux in *L'Évènement* and *La Femme gelée* at the time of her clandestine abortion and, later, as a new mother (chapter two). She also alludes to her status as mother as well as her chemotherapy (chapter one) in describing an advertising campaign where an image of a woman breastfeeding is used to designate breast cancer, with a distressing inference (*Vie* 49-50). When a young woman catches her eye on another train, moreover, aware that a man is watching her, Ernaux remembers 'la cour de récréation, quand on riait de honte et de plaisir, la main sur la bouche, en nous regardant les unes et les autres, parce que Geneviève C. nous montrait sa vulve.' (*Journal* 81-82) She additionally begins to greet women whom she sees 'deux fois de suite', in the knowledge that she is growing significantly older (*Journal* 83). This simple exchange, according to Russell, allows for 'a reassessment of her evolving public interactions with the world over the course of her life.'<sup>321</sup> Ernaux also identifies with 'une femme noire en boubou' who walks into a high-end boutique. Ernaux imagines that staff would find 'qu'elle n'est pas à sa place'. (*Journal* 75) Thomas outlines in her study of class, gender and whiteness in Ernaux's work that Ernaux is implicated here in the white gaze because she observes the scene, where a woman is scrutinised because of her skin colour and clothes, but the phrase 'à sa place' is part of the lexis which she employs to speak of her own oppression.<sup>322</sup> This phrase sends us back to moments where Ernaux was not in her place either, hence the title of her foundational work *La Place*.<sup>323</sup> Ernaux thus leans on her own corporeal and social experiences – in relation to maternity, schoolyard antics, medical treatment, femininity, ageing and class – to forge a connection with other women, of multiple races and ages.

Establishing parallels in this way between our experiences and those of others enables Ernaux to infer a commonality of human behaviour. In her *journaux extimes*, just as in her erotic triad, this commonality is once again intermeshed with sexual difference (chapter two). In *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux writes about a museum exhibition of the acquisitions of Imelda Marcos (First Lady of the Philippines during her husband Ferdinand's dictatorial and kleptocratic presidency

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<sup>321</sup> Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>322</sup> Lyn Thomas, 'Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15.2 (2006), 159-168 (pp. 165-166).

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

from 1965 to 1986). Ernaux intimates that visitors were less interested in the political content than in examining Imelda's undergarments:

La Révolution de ce pays aboutit là, aux signes du sexe d'une femme, pourtant haïe. Cinq cents soutiens-gorge, culottes et porte-jarretelles, devant lesquels on défile, qu'on touche, les femmes en rêvant de les mettre et les hommes de se branler dedans. (*Journal* 23).

Ernaux's narrative selection is very telling: the inclusion of this event juxtaposes the political extreme with erotic dreams, oppression with sexual release. Erotic desire is thus presented as a form of fantastical escape, even when the fantasy is built from the possessions of one's oppressors. More obviously, the indication is that a common trait amongst the visitors is their keen interest in erotic preferences, over their political history. The thrill no doubt lies in gaining a peep into the private lives of public figures. But also, it shows that what unite us as humans, more than political powers, are our sexual impulses and erotic creativity. It is equally notable that Ernaux splits this fantasy up between the sexes, with women wearing bras and men masturbating over them, thus inferring a commonality of stereotypical gender roles. Similarly, we are informed of a woman getting ready to visit a man at the beginning of this journal (13), which is reminiscent of Ernaux's copious preparations to see A and S in her erotic triad (chapter two). Ernaux also alludes to the ways in which sexual difference and desire are connected to our social role as consumers, such as when she speaks of a little girl on a train wearing 'des lunettes de soleil en forme de cœur' holding 'un petit panier de plastique tressé vert pomme', who conveys 'Le bonheur absolu d'arborer les premiers signes de "dame" et celui de posséder des choses désirées.' (*Journal* 64) This is akin to the joy Ernaux experiences when buying lingerie to wear for her partners (chapter two). For Ernaux, the act of purchasing something is an emotional process, which influences our sexual and loving relationships with other people (*Journal* 87). No wonder then that, for her, the disappearance of shops signals 'la mort d'une partie de soi, la plus désirante' (*La Vie* 16). In short, that which marks us as humans in these two works are our desires as consumers and lovers, which are interconnected (the pleasure of buying clothes, for instance, often lying in the pre-emption of the sexual act).

*Regarde les lumières mon amour*

This is all the more clearly exemplified in *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, which is based at Auchan in the Trois-Fontaines commercial centre in Cergy-Pontoise. The hypermarket is one of the best examples of capitalism and consumerism in action, and of the ways in which it divides and unites people. The former is made clear at the very beginning of this *journal*, with Ernaux referring to her entry into a supermarket in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall, where she witnesses a shift from communism to capitalism and the effects on the citizens of Košice, Slovakia, following its official break with the Czech Republic and adoption of a capitalist system.<sup>324</sup> Ernaux's reflections on our contemporary version of capitalism in the Western world is not a positive one, and she clearly criticises the loss of individualism within these spaces. And yet, this work also indicates that the hypermarket – synecdoche of capitalism and consumerism – reflects that which connects us all as humans: mostly our identity as desiring subjects. This setting is also symptomatic of her class-interests. The hypermarket signifies an ethical space for Ernaux, where the working-class male is offered a return to artisanal nobility within specialised areas, like bakery or fishmongery sections, and where one may be disorientated, but not degraded (53). In addition, Auchan is indicative of Ernaux's ongoing objective throughout her corpus to valorise the ordinary. Supermarkets have only recently been considered spaces worthy of representation, despite the fact that these spaces pervade all of our lives and memories (10). As we find out in the first half of this text, *Regarde les lumières mon amour* is something a mother tells her child, whilst pointing up towards the hypermarket lighting (40). By attributing value to the glaring white beams usually associated with anonymous, clinical spaces, Ernaux draws attention to the beauty of the banal. In summation, nowhere could be more appropriate a place than the hypermarket for Ernaux's third *journal extime*, where she endeavours to write about the human condition, accounting for difference and the surprises to be gleaned from the more mundane elements of human experience. There is thus more than a little truth in Auchan's advertising strapline: '**La vie. La vraie. Auchan.**' [author's emphasis] (27) This setting permits Ernaux to

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<sup>324</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Regarde les lumières mon amour* (Paris : Seuil, 2014), p. 9. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

tackle crucial socio-political issues such as poverty and Islamophobia, making this text (from the mouth of the author herself), ‘beaucoup plus engagé que le *Journal du dehors* (1993) et *La Vie extérieure* (2000).’<sup>325</sup> Though Ernaux writes about men and women visiting Auchan, moreover, there is some indication that the hypermarket is a largely female space, and one which normalises the feminisation of the domestic sphere (supermarkets reappear regularly in *Journal du dehors* too, as do hairdressers;<sup>326</sup> another predominantly female space as the row of heads shows us in *La Femme gelée* [chapter two]). I will here explore the relevance of the hypermarket when it comes to representing the sexual desires, gendered identity and corporeal presence of people from a range of countries and racial and religious backgrounds.

### **All-inclusive Loyalties**

Ernaux remarks that people of 130 different nationalities visit Auchan, all united by their desire to be fed and clothed (38). In Auchan like Ernaux’s corpus, difference is transcended by a common desire to be nurtured, by consumerable goods or human recognition; just like the women of a certain age mentioned above and the teenager figuratively deserted. Ernaux registers the ethnicities of the clients she examines – including a black woman, an Asian male and Arab adolescents – but denies any political project, looking only to reconstitute a space for these subjects in the same way that the hypermarket does (21-22). Her international and multi-ethnic optic, however, shows itself to be more political than she alleges. It is not in vain that she recalls the collapse of a factory in Bangladesh, a site of clothing production for Carrefour, Camaïeu and, ironically, Auchan (62). If ‘subjective reports imbued with value judgements [...] contradict Ernaux’s proclaimed role of neutral observer’ according to Russell,<sup>327</sup> this is further substantiated by well-placed objective statements. Ernaux thus shows us examples of minority populations profiting from hypermarkets in France, and of exploited individuals at the planet’s antipodes, killed

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<sup>325</sup> Ernaux, ‘Entretien avec Pierre-Louis Fort’, p. 201.

<sup>326</sup> Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

by globalisation, victims of a postmodern *non-lieu* (it is worth noting that this event affected women in particular, with most of the 1100 victims being female<sup>328</sup>).

‘Non-spaces’ as Augé defines them (motorways, airports etc.) constitute areas where humans are made anonymous because of their mass movement, and where human interaction finds itself circumscribed to a handful of rudimentary manoeuvres, deprived of profound exchange.<sup>329</sup> This dissolution of the human self is sustained by capitalist systems which lock human communication into a network of buying and selling, where each person’s identity is established according to their role as consumer or seller.<sup>330</sup> It is for this reason that Augé suggests that strangers can feel at home within *non-lieux*, with brands and logos operating as landmarks, and anonymity taking on a reassuring quality.<sup>331</sup> *Non-lieux* can thus incarnate familiar territories where everyone, of all origins, can anchor and lose themselves within a crowd. This is loosely linked to sex in *La Vie extérieure*, when Ernaux writes ‘Seul le distributeur libère’ (41); condom machines liberate people from the shame of making the intimate public. Auchan is an equally anonymising and collective space, but proves itself to be much less enriching according to Ernaux’s commentaries. She expresses her anger with regards to the possessive pronoun ‘nous’ that figures on signs, declaring that ‘Ni moi ni les autres ne sommes la propriété d’Auchan’ (19). The pronoun ‘nous’ is aptly used, moreover, given that Ernaux outlines some of the ways in which collective identity comes to be shaped by the norms established by the hypermarket. Ernaux observes that the implications made about boys and girls through the toy range colonises our subconscious, and suggests that it is here that FEMEN should centre their energy (18). Ernaux also refers to the supermarket as an extension of women’s universe (51), and the cookery books lining the shelves remind her of herself at twenty-five, living in ‘La pérennité de la femme aux casseroles’ (68) which she narrates in closer detail in *La Femme gelée* (chapter two). She employs several small gestures of resistance against this threat to individualism in *Regarde les lumières*, boycotting electronic cashiers and tearing up her loyalty

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<sup>328</sup> Charles Stratford, ‘Bangladeshi Factories Still Unsafe Five Years After Collapse’, *Aljazeera*, 24 April 2018.

<sup>329</sup> Augé, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94 and 100.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

card (20 and 70). She battles in this way against the effacement of the individual and of interpersonal relations which neo-liberalism and technology provoke.

Inversely, people are studied closely within the hypermarket through video-surveillance. Ernaux is conscious of video cameras above her in the underwear and tights aisle (16), recalling, as an aside, the persistent objectification of women today. But most importantly, the quasi-omnipresence of cameras symbolises the role of the writer, the consumers passing under her watchful eye. In her corpus as with the hypermarket, individual bodies are simultaneously dissolved within the anonymous *non-lieu* – imbricated within what Ernaux terms elsewhere ‘une réalité plus vaste’<sup>332</sup> – and highly focalised, the anonymous citizen examined in detail. The only notable divergence is that subjects in her literary space are respected not exploited, her narrative voice reframing the *non-lieu* to eliminate dehumanising elements. It is not for nothing, after all, that she names writing her ‘vrai lieu’.<sup>333</sup> Her voice kills nobody, and she does not envisage a ‘nous’: it is clear that this is a case of her voice speaking for others, and that these others are not synonymous with her *je personnel*. Aurélie Adler offers a similar nuance in ‘Une Communauté de désirs’ :

Dans le temps des horloges et dans les espaces communs, Ernaux ne se distingue pas du *nous*. Dans le temps de l’écriture, retirée dans le ‘vrai lieu’, elle est celle qui se donne à la communauté par l’écriture de la connaissance et du danger.<sup>334</sup>

As in her earlier two *journaux extimes*, moreover, Ernaux delves into her memory bank to limit the distance between herself and others, giving herself to others through a shared ‘connaissance’. During an interview for France Culture about *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, Ernaux underlines the importance of seeing things from other people’s perspective, including of ourselves as another (‘la réciprocité est importante’<sup>335</sup>). Following her own advice, she wonders what it might

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<sup>332</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L’Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric Yves-Jeannet*, with postscript by Annie Ernaux (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), p. 23. A full explanation will be provided in chapter four.

<sup>333</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Le Vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte* (Paris : Gallimard, 2014), p. 111.

<sup>334</sup> Aurélie Adler, ‘Une Communauté de désirs’, in *Annie Ernaux. Un Engagement d’écriture*, pp. 145-155 (p. 152).

<sup>335</sup> Marc Voinchet, ‘Dans le caddie d’Annie Ernaux’, *Les Matins*, France Culture, 28 March 2014.



be like to wear a veil to a hypermarket and how she would be treated, concluding on a radio show for *France Inter* that this would prove difficult and frightening.<sup>336</sup> She also tries to identify with veiled women in *Regarde les lumières* by considering their experiences in relation to her personal points of reference: marriage and Catholicism. She compares veiled women to the nuns of her childhood, asking herself which of the two are freer (58).<sup>337</sup> She decides that if ‘Dieu et l’homme ne font qu’un’, ‘dans l’échelle du plaisir, la musulmane voilée gagne’ (58) and states that she would be proud ‘[de] susciter autant d’interrogations, auxquelles, par ailleurs, les médias ne leur donnent jamais l’occasion de répondre.’ (59) This allusion to their hyper-visibility in mediatised discourse in the West reminds us of hers under the CCTV cameras of Auchan, reinforced elsewhere by the word ‘*dévisagé*’ (37), italicised for emphasis. Her representation of veiled women is thus built on a recognition of reciprocity, which is far removed from the posture of saviour adopted by certain feminists in the West.<sup>338</sup> This is a particularly sensitive point of contention in France, in light of the 2004 law prohibiting the wearing of headscarves in public spaces (upheld by reputable feminists) and the forced removal of burkinis along the French Riviera in 2016.<sup>339</sup> In terms of marriage, moreover, it is worth thinking back to the dismal predicament of *La Femme gelée*’s heroine. This breaks with the usual assumptions produced by a ‘third-world difference’ rhetoric which, according to Chandra Mohanty, presumes the position of ‘western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives’.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Pascale Clark, interview with Annie Ernaux, ‘Comme On Nous Parle’, *France Inter*, 5 May 2014.

<sup>337</sup> Ernaux does not specify what type of veil she is referring to, although the reference to ‘une bande blanche’ peeking out from beneath a woman’s veil (58) (hence the link to nuns) implies she is wearing an al-amira hijab, rather than a niqab or burka. Her vague reference to ‘la femme au voile’ (58) usefully mirrors the contention of postcolonial theorist Sherene H. Razack that the wearing of a veil (along with female genital mutilation) constitutes a general marker of difference, by which ‘the bodies of Asian and African women, both in the North and in the South’ are demarcated ‘as bodies to be saved by benevolent and more civilized Europeans.’ Sherene H. Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1998), pp. 6-7.

<sup>338</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), pp. 230-231. Thomas, ‘Voix blanche?’, p. 209.

<sup>339</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>340</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, *Boundary 2*, 12.3 (1984), 333-358 (p. 353).

Ernaux does not pretend to comprehend the condition of women wearing the veil absolutely either. As Thomas observes, she ‘imagines herself in their place, whilst at the same time [...] recognising that she knows nothing about their experience’.<sup>341</sup> Her comparisons reinforce her *inexperience* when it comes to the wearing of the veil. This is the same technique to that applied in *Journal du dehors*, of which Russell says a ‘subsequent shift to personal history suggests a growing appreciation of the greater persuasiveness of personal storytelling over generalising pronouncements with regards to identity characteristics.’<sup>342</sup> Drawing on personal memories when recording the behaviour of others prevents a totalising narrative from forming, and presents other people’s stories as both unique and relatable (or ‘*narratable*’<sup>343</sup>). Put another way (and to pre-empt the next section’s argument), she attempts to speak *to* not *for* other women – offering them ‘l’occasion de répondre’ – in accord with the careful distinction posed by Spivak between generative and paternalist modes of intercultural communication.<sup>344</sup>

There is also a parallel to be drawn between veiled women’s heightened presence in the Western media and Augé’s theorisation of the *non-lieu*. Augé suggests that the universality of human experience within the *non-lieu* and the depersonalisation we experience can be both unsettling, as we lose our sense of individuality, and comforting, as our personal fears and concerns evaporate through a safe sense of anonymity. Ironically, those on the margins of super-modern social networks become hyper-visible in the *non-lieu*. Wearing a veil, for one, may make women *more* visible in such spaces as the Western hypermarket. In the *non-lieu*, a nondescript space where difference is erased according to Augé, Muslim women’s difference may be more noticeable. This is also true for the homeless people who feature in Ernaux’s earlier *journaux extimes* (*Journal du dehors* [78-79]; *La Vie extérieure* [123-125]). It is not only communists, like the people of Košice (or more

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<sup>341</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>342</sup> Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013), p. 326.

This is not always the case. Tierney looks at how Ernaux distorts an account of female genital mutilation in *Le Monde* (*Journal* 39) to attribute certain emotions to the women castrators (happiness and devotion), and emphasise levels of violence by referring to a shard of glass. Tierney, *op. cit.*, p. 121. As with the Bangladeshi reference, Ernaux manipulates narrative form in places to push a particular political agenda.

broadly, people from the Eastern block as Augé makes clear<sup>345</sup>) who fail to reap the rewards of capitalist non-spaces. This is also a reminder that many of Ernaux's conditions for what it means to be human, desire and love (signified by the collective codes of tights, lingerie and the pleasure of ownership that reoccur in each journal) are not accessible to all members of society. One might also be tempted to think about those left out by traditional conceptions of gendered identity or sexual experience, such as the binary model proposed by Ernaux in front of Imelda's underwear. As such, a consumerist culture (and its respective supra-modern *non-lieux*) can divide and exclude as well as unite people.

*Regarde les lumières mon amour* also underscores the issues involved with representing others when one comes from a privileged position, made very clear when Ernaux tries to take a photograph of a black boy. She stops herself short, conceding that this action stems from a long colonial pictorial tradition (42). As Thomas notes, 'she places herself in the scene, holding a camera, alongside the object of her gaze, the black boy',<sup>346</sup> and in doing so draws our attention to the hands in charge of the footage. Ernaux is also reprimanded by a cashier for putting a copy of *Le Monde* in her basket which she bought elsewhere. Ernaux attempts to explain herself, to which the cashier responds that, in the event of a search the cashier would be the one to pay the price. Ernaux then writes 'Je viens d'être remise à ma place pour n'avoir pas pensé à la sienne' (54), a further allusion to her social displacement as a working-class girl in *La Place*. In this *extime* text and others though, it is she who adopts a dominant gaze, and these two events testify to a level of responsibility felt by Ernaux towards the human beings she observes. Ernaux's narrative technique in her *journaux extimes* thus intimates a delicate balancing act: to identify with others through her autobiographical texts, without compromising their identities through the bias of her authorial I.

## Conclusion

The choice of *non-lieux* as the setting for Ernaux's *journaux extimes* enables her to convey the ordinary, daily occurrences of people, of various classes, nationalities, cultures, religions and races (nearly all of us pass through train corridors or

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<sup>345</sup> Augé, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>346</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

supermarket aisles). Ernaux then uses this as a basis for comparing the conditions of minority groups in her current hometown and across the world. The hypermarket proves to be the *non-lieu par excellence* in *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, since people share in a collective anonymity and clear common goal: to feed themselves and their families. In all three of her *journaux extimes*, in fact, the studied subjects are united by a shared shame and desire, be that in terms of sex or consumerism (both going hand in hand). And yet, we saw how Western values, capitalism and *non-lieux* can impede on people's individuality, safety and social inclusion, especially women. I likewise concluded that Ernaux highlights the gap between herself and others, being irrevocably *à l'écart* from the prostitutes, homeless, HIV/AIDs victims, veiled women and cashiers whom she depicts, and those of minority races. Ernaux is painfully aware of this limitation and tries to mitigate it by: drawing on her experiences as far as possible (of motherhood; education; abortion; breast cancer; marriage; religion), and consciously policing her own judgements and behaviour. In summation, Ernaux writes about others and discovers, in the process, impassable obstacles between *je* and *un autre* (chapter four). This recognition is a sign of respect, Ernaux wanting to acknowledge but not appropriate the bodies and voices of others, and allows her to reflect on her own privilege and marginalisation. Ultimately, she chooses to celebrate what unites rather than divides us.<sup>347</sup> In the next section, I will focus more on sexual oppression than desire, and show the characters in Huston's *Danse noire* and *Dolce agonia* to be regularly divided in their views. Ironically, I will show that among other things, this allows for a speaking *to* not *for* others, extending the above arguments.

### **3.2 Speaking to Others in Huston's *Danse noire* and *Dolce agonia***

In her portrayal of sexual and bodily experience, Huston goes further than Ernaux in addressing geographical and cultural differences, no doubt because of her own polychromic history. Huston is the most international of the three authors, being born in Alberta, living in France, writing in French and English and auto-translating

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<sup>347</sup> Before ending this section, it is important to mention Ernaux's select terminology, to favour similarities not differences, and to invite other people to do the same. She never uses the word 'immigré' for instance, because 'Ce mot ne me vient pas, car je ne pense pas dans ces termes-là. J'écris, au fond, pour que les gens fassent comme moi, qu'ils ne pensent pas immigré.' Ernaux, 'Entretien avec Pierre-Louis Fort', p. 206.

her corpus. Much of her work centres on the question of hybridity, exile and language, and the need to recognise spaces between multiple geographical, cultural, racial and linguistic ones. Huston's mother, an Anglophone, abandoned her family and home when Nancy was six years old, and Huston turned to French as a secondary language to write in, freed somewhat of the traumatic memory of loss associated with her maternal tongue. As Alison Rice puts it, 'the "foreign" nature of French culture and language presents a liberating space in which she can move and grow'.<sup>348</sup> Yet Huston never abandons one language or nation in favour of another, each remaining an important determinant of how she sees herself and perceives the world. She thus resents those who pigeonhole transnational beings like her,<sup>349</sup> and stresses instead the liberating potential of being uprooted. In her scholarly contribution to the 2007 *Pour une littérature-monde* manifesto, 'Traduttore non è Traditore', she declares that: 'La lâcheté de mes attaches originelles, à laquelle est venu s'ajouter mon exil choisi, me permet de me glisser dans la peau de tout le monde et de n'importe qui.'<sup>350</sup>

The problem with this statement is that Huston assumes *a priori* a sense of kinship with anybody and an ability to understand them, crucial if one is to step into their skin. In so doing, one could conclude that Huston underplays her privilege which is arguably that of a white middle-class writer, and that this endeavour is akin to a neo-colonial "speaking for", to borrow Spivak's terminology.<sup>351</sup> In this next section, however, I will explore how Huston utilises a range of creative narrative techniques to grant a fictional voice to minority and even subaltern figures in *Danse noire* (2013) and *Dolce agonia* (2001), in a way that is attentive to the difficulties of representation and dangers of *misrepresentation*, speaking *to* not *for* others. My main subjects of analysis will be prostitutes and their children, porn-stars, rape-victims and carers. I will examine how their race, ethnicity, regional background, sexuality,

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<sup>348</sup> Alison Rice, "Making the Familiar Foreign": Exile and Identity in Nancy Huston's *Lettres parisiennes* and *Nord perdu*, *Essays in French Literature and Culture*, 45 (2008), 105-24 (pp. 121-122).

<sup>349</sup> Nancy Huston, *Nord perdu/Douze France* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1999), p. 72.

<sup>350</sup> Nancy Huston, 'Traduttore non è Traditore', in *Pour une littérature-monde*, ed. by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (Paris : Gallimard, 2007), pp. 151-160 (p. 153).

<sup>351</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp. 66-111 (p. 70).

nationality and social status affects their sexual and bodily experiences, and how these come to be represented.

### *Danse noire*

*Danse noire* shifts between two narrative forms (a film script, and reflections on this creative process), and voices (Paul Schwarz and an omniscient narrator). It is Paul who narrates the main story and who, as we find out at the end, is dead all along (329).<sup>352</sup> This spectral figure tells the story of his life-partner Milo, a lovable rogue born under unfortunate circumstances (as the child of a prostitute addicted to heroine, with an incompetent father) who becomes hugely successful as a capoeira star and film director. Milo is a multinational, bisexual, mixed race and trilingual hero. He is born of a native Indian woman in Quebec, adopted as a child by German speakers, and then taken to live with family members in Quebec who are divided between French and English speakers (the sons raised as secular Anglophones, and the daughters as Francophone Catholics [247]). He goes on to settle with an Argentinian Jew (Paul) and to adopt a black Brazilian boy. The form and structure of this bildungsroman is equally transnational, as well as transtemporal. It focuses not simply on Milo's life, but on that of his ancestors in Quebec and Ireland (spanning a century of his familial history from 1910-2010 [20]), and consecrates notable attention to the oppression of native Indians (163-164). It is also written in Canada's two official languages, English and French, as well as *joual*, a quintessentially Quebecois dialect. *Danse noire* is thus a literary form of capoeira: a form of bodily expression, according to Milo, that transcends linguistic difference (324). In this way, Huston produces a fertile account of Canadian history to substitute what she describes as cultural homogenisation in *Pour un patriotisme de l'ambiguïté*.<sup>353</sup>

This novel thus crosses multiple spatial, temporal and linguistic spaces, and voices several histories through the story of one man. This is in keeping with Marta

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<sup>352</sup> Nancy Huston, *Danse noire* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2013), p. 329. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>353</sup> 'Toutes ces cultures, toutes ces langues, une fois mélangées et bouillies ensemble dans le creuset canadien, se sont réduites à... "Yahoo" !' ; 'Les distances réduites à néant et, du coup, les quatre piliers de la culture – nourriture, musique, religion, langue – sont toujours-déjà-là, généralisés, instantanés, brassés, homogénéisés.' Nancy Huston, *Pour un patriotisme de l'ambiguïté : Notes autour d'un voyage aux sources* (Montréal : Fides, 1994), pp. 31-32 and 37.

Dvořák's view that 'Nancy Huston a toujours osé franchir les frontières génériques, linguistiques, narratologiques. Dans son premier roman déjà, *Les Variations Goldberg*, elle disait "je" à la place de trente personnages différents.'<sup>354</sup> In the section that follows, I will be interested in minority and subaltern 'je's. This novel is rich in its depiction of different types of marginalisation, referring to black only areas (15), Milo dying of HIV/AIDs (13) and Milo and his mother's struggles with heroine addiction (208). I will centre my attention on prostitutes and indigenous women, especially Milo's mother Awinita (aka Nita), before finishing with a study of an erotic encounter between Paul and Milo.

### **Awinita and Unnamed Characters**

From the very beginning of the novel, we are made aware of Nita's minority status as a native Indian prostitute and minor. When she first meets Milo's father Dec, she is described in the following way, 'cette blonde est indienne, et cette enfant va enfanter', and we learn that Dec has never slept with a native Indian woman before (32) alluding to her exoticisation on the sex market. Her indigeneity exposes her to additional forms of oppression as a prostitute, edified in a particularly biting way by one client's comments: 'Don't you know what condoms are for? Don't they teach you that up on the Res? They sure should! Be the only useful education for Redskins.' (62). The implication here is that native women should be discouraged from reproducing, a reminder of the forced eugenic sterilisation of indigenous women by medical professionals in Canada up to the 1980s.<sup>355</sup> It is apt, then, that Nita's mistreatment should be best reflected when she gives birth in hospital. The nuns surrounding her mouth insults over her bed, calling her child a bastard and savage, and Nita an Indian whore (40 and 135), and when one nun refers to her baby as human garbage, it is with seemingly little conviction that another replies: 'Jésus nous aime tous.' (39) Whilst stitching Nita up, they go as far to say that they should 'tout recoudre' (her labia one imagines), 'pour qu'elle arrête de corrompre nos pauv' hommes vulnérables' (135), reinforcing Nita's own vulnerability.

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<sup>354</sup> Marta Dvořák, 'Introduction', in *Vision/Division*, pp. ix-xiii (p. ix).

<sup>355</sup> Sandra Hobbs, 'Le Personnage autochtone féminin dans le roman canadien français et québécois', paper presented at *Médiation et transition*, Université de La Rochelle, 6 June 2018.

This implicit racism and prejudice at an institutional level testifies to the difficulty if not impossibility of improving one's situation as a native Indian woman: the horizons open to Nita are significantly more limited than those presented to white Canadians. Whilst a colleague of hers goes to work in a hotel she encourages the others to join her; all except Nita, because she claims they will not hire native Indian girls (167). To comfort her, she says 'at least you're working again, huh, Nita? That's amazing. Got your figure right back, eh?' (167), which is anything but a consolation. This is reinforced when we hear of a prostitute being raped with a broken bottle before being thrown from a window, after having agreed to go to a client's house for extra money. All that reads on her death record is '*Native Female, Unidentified*' (312-313). Nita's brothel owner explains that the same could happen to Nita, and that she should be careful (313), another reminder that she is not on the same plane as the other girls there. The anonymity of the dead girl's death certificate infers her grossly peripheral position in society, moreover, pointing to even greater levels of degradation. The terms employed thus differentiate carefully between multiple sex workers, as opposed to pitting native Indian workers against white ones. This is clear when Dec asks Nita whether she knew her, and Nita replies with 'How could I? I'm Cree, she Mohawk. Our reserves are days apart.' (313) This response reflects the complex character of kinship: micro-communities are shown to be vital to identity formation, as well as ethnicity.

There is also a distinction to be made between marginalised subjects, those who are marginalised to another degree (like Nita), and subaltern figures. The term subaltern, coined by Gramsci, refers to a 'non-hegemonic subject'<sup>356</sup> who has 'limited or no access to the cultural imperialism'.<sup>357</sup> If minority figures can be deemed other, the subaltern is defined as 'quite-other'.<sup>358</sup> Minority figures hold a certain position of power in maintaining what Tamsin Lorraine calls 'an alternative epistemological claim to that of the dominant culture', whereas subaltern figures are

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<sup>356</sup> Celia M. Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: UP Virginia, 1999), p. 53.

<sup>357</sup> Leon de Kock, 'Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 23.3 (1992), 29-47 (p. 45).

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*



altogether detached from that ‘dominant culture’.<sup>359</sup> Central to our interests is the idea that the subaltern’s exclusion from socio-cultural hegemony renders them more prone to being spoken *for*. That being said, they are not entirely voiceless, as Spivak argued in 1988.<sup>360</sup> She changes her mind in 2013, explaining that one can speak to the subaltern, and gain a response, as long as speaking *for* is replaced by speaking *to*, and provided there is a listening subject.<sup>361</sup> Ultimately, it is through literature that Spivak envisages this dialogue: ‘For me, the “philosophico-literary” – the aesthetic in aesthetic education – is the means for persistently attempting collectivities to come’.<sup>362</sup> In other words, philosophy and literature (or philosophical literature) can allow for bridges to be built between people, in spite of the differences between them. How then, does Huston achieve a speaking to, not for? The clearest example would be that of Nita’s daughter whose name is never revealed. She is born and immediately given up for adoption and excluded from the story from then onwards, Paul saying ‘ça doit être bizarre d’avoir une demi-sœur qui se balade quelque part sur la planète et de ne savoir ni qui elle est, ni où elle est, ni quel genre de vie elle a eue...’ (136). This narrative lacuna draws attention to the existence of a subaltern figure without constructing a narrative for her, and reflects in the process the voicelessness of subaltern figures within society. These are not silences or gaps in an absolute sense, since we are made aware of what we do not know. In turn, this recognition shows respect towards these individuals by refusing to assume their world position.

This is nowhere better executed than at the end of the novel. Firstly, Nita has the final say in terms of her and Dec’s relationship, leaving to live with somebody else and making Dec sign a handwritten declaration, binding him to the care of their baby if she proves unable to take care of him. This is so that she may be sure not to lose track of Milo as she had done with her first child (347). The fact that this declaration is handwritten indicates that Nita is literate, and thus not entirely voiceless or marginalised (subaltern), and her strength is demonstrated through her ability to procure a signature, albeit a reticent one, from Dec. Secondly, the final

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<sup>359</sup> Tamsin Lorraine, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity, and Duration* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 71.

<sup>360</sup> Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 326.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464

lines of the novel go as follows: 'Awinita replie son exemplaire du contrat et le glisse dans son sac. Elle reste assise là, enceinte de neuf mois, sans bouger. Comme toujours, son expression est insondable. Elle est prête.' (348) The fact that her expression gives nothing away, and never has, indicates that Nita's narrative has remained relatively private throughout the novel, her own viewpoint being protected from the reader's gaze. This privacy, coupled with the more immediate fact that we do not learn what she is ready for, means that Nita as a character becomes more powerful than the narrative voice; her future unbeknownst to them or the reader. This cliff-hanger means that any future is possible for Nita, not just the possibility of being 'obèse et alcoolique' as Paul earlier suggests (305). This moment is attributed additional gravitas through the use of her full name, Awinita, commanding respect during the closing shot. Huston thus grants her absolute power through her silence.

Further, whilst we are never told exactly what Nita thinks, the film-script form allows us to see things from her perspective. Paul regularly refers to certain filming strategies throughout the novel, deciding when, how and why to film certain elements in a particular way. One recurring preoccupation is the camera angle. In one of the opening scenes of the novel, Paul decides to opt for a subjective shot from Nita's perspective. Though the omniscient narrative voice is in control of the script (in the literary and cinematographic sense), everything we are told to see is through Nita's eyes so that we in a sense *become* her:

Caméra subjective : nous sommes dans le regard de la femme. [...].

Nous sommes Awinita, nous sommes la femme ; toujours dans ces séquences nous serons elle. Soudain, nous attrapons notre reflet dans la glace au-dessus du bar. Nous sommes blondes. (27).

Nita's views are not always enunciated, but this subjective camera gaze makes us as readers (emphasised by the collective pronoun 'Nous') imagine how she would perceive the world, and herself.

In addition, certain images or sounds are described to create a sense of how she might be feeling. This is clear through the repetition of orgasmic noises and belts unbuckling during sex scenes between Nita and her clients. The fictional narrative voice of Milo questions whether the viewers may get bored of hearing the same sounds, but Paul explains that:

Mais, en y réfléchissant, ils se rendront compte que ce qui nous semble répétitif à nous au bout de cinq minutes doit être une mort spirituelle pour

ceux qui, sous une contrainte ou une autre, consacrent des mois voire des années de leur vie à aider des inconnus à éjaculer. (280)

In the end, he consents to Milo's view and opts for indigenous drumming instead. The idea that repetition can allow the viewer to empathise with a character's past experiences is illustrative of Bourdieu's sociological theory of the *habitus*; namely, the notion that people come to embody certain social norms through habituation (their 'pratiques') which, in turn, allows for the stratification of cultural alliances and lifestyles in accordance with these habits (by which class, amongst other groupings, is determined).<sup>363</sup> In becoming habituated, even temporarily, with the recurring sounds to which Nita is subjected, we gain an insight into her private *habitus* even if we belong to different cultural spheres. In addition, the reproduction of a repeated habit allows for an ethical representation, in so far as it allows one to allude to somebody else's suffering without articulating it in one's own words. This is substantiated by the etymological roots of the word ethics, which stems from the Greek word for habit, *ethos*.<sup>364</sup> It is also essential to highlight the phrase 'sous une contrainte ou une autre', as it is clear Huston wishes to differentiate between prostitutes who act out of necessity, and those who can act out of choice, to bypass blanket ethical judgements. The choice of indigenous drumming is also notable, moreover, since it alludes to the continuous reference to an extradiegetic capoeira beat throughout the film, which reminds the viewer and reader of Milo's roots and his dead mother's prevailing presence (the capoeira beat signifying 'le rythme de la voix de [...] [sa] mère' [15]).

### **Paul and Milo**

The camera angle used to replicate Nita's gaze is also deployed to describe her son Milo, from the perspective of Paul as spectator:

Gros plan, pendant qu'il s'éloigne, sur son cul superbement moulé par son pantalon blanc. T'en fais pas, amour, je n'en rajouterai pas... même si je meurs d'envie de le faire. On sera avec toi, en toi. Caméra subjective : on entendra dans ta tête le rythme distinctif d'un atabaque de capoeira. (14)

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<sup>363</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction : Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris : Minuit, 1979), p. 190.

<sup>364</sup> Jules Evans, *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* (London: Random House, 2013), p. 9.

The combination of sexualised focalisation, and the second-person narration through which Paul speaks to Milo complicates the process of representing others. The voyeuristic male gaze is here supplanted by the free indirect shift to second-person narration, through which the primary subject reaches out to the other even in the event of objectifying them. The narrative form moves from cinematographic to self-conscious narration, more redolent of novelistic prose; from mimesis to diegesis; from story-telling to the story's deconstruction; from the written-image like Ernaux's *photos écrites* (chapter one) to writing about writing (to simplify matters, I would like to suggest the term 'lit-script'). None of these narrative lines, moreover, constitutes the primary storyline. The meta-textual sub-plot allows Paul to reflect on Milo's past and bring him into the creative conversation, key to forging a comprehensive picture of Milo's relation to Paul, and the process of production. This lit-script thus draws attention to the limits of representation, and celebrates pluri-generic dialogue as a richer means of (sexual) story-telling.

As for Paul's assertion that 'On sera avec toi, en toi', this is perfectly illustrated during the one gay sex scene of the novel between Paul and Milo. The written narrative concentrates on bodies and sexual gestures, whilst the camera is said to focus on the 'motifs formés sur la vitre de douche par la vapeur et les gouttelettes d'eau.' (323) As was the case for the generic erotic symbols in *L'Usage de la photo* (chapter one), the steamed glass and water droplets are sufficiently non-descript for the reader to picture the scene based on their memory stock, to figuratively get under the water with 'les dieux païens les plus lascifs de la Grèce et la Rome antiques' (322). In this way, Huston's lit-script enables the reader to see the world through the eyes of another. Some experiences, however, are off-limits. We never hear Milo's own voice for instance, though he is the hero of the piece, and Paul is acutely aware of his limitations when it comes to reflecting Milo's past. Most obviously, he does not know how to film a heroin scene (263), perhaps because he himself has not experimented with the drug. This implies that one cannot accurately represent another's *habitus* without having experienced their habits first. It is for this reason, we will see, that Arcan finds it so important to tell her story over anybody else's, having experienced the world of an escort first-hand.

### *Dolce agonia*

*Dolce agonia* is not multigeneric like *Danse noire*, following a strictly literary form. It does, however, include an omniscient narrative voice (an omniscient narrator and the voice of God) and free indirect discourse, allowing for numerous points of focalisation. This novel includes some of the central characters of one of Huston's earlier novels, *La Virevolte* (1994), yet is far from being a traditional sequel. The key protagonist of *La Virevolte* and her children, Lin, Angela and Marina, are mentioned only in passing,<sup>365</sup> and the auxiliary characters of Rachel and Sean come to be key protagonists of *Dolce agonia*, with the whole story unfolding in Sean's home. We are told the past, present and future stories of an eclectic and inter- and intranational cast: Sean (an Irish author) and his ex-girlfriend Rachel and her husband Derek (both philosophy professors from Manhattan and New Jersey respectively); Sean's Italian ex-girlfriend Patrizia born in South Boston; Sean's lawyer Brian from LA and his feminist wife and doctor Beth from Alabama; Sean's Belarussian painter and decorator Leonid and his wife Katie from Pennsylvania; Sean's Ukrainian baker Aron; Sean's departmental colleagues at University and fellow authors/poets, Charles from Chicago (of African descent) and Hal of Cincinnatti, with his young Canadian wife Chloé and their son Hal Junior. Whilst the novel is set in one place then, the multiple origins of the characters present reflect the international identity of North America, and allow for multiple cultural viewpoints to emerge within one setting. All that unites them in any tangible way is their connection to Sean, all meeting in one house for one Thanksgiving meal over the course of one day; a commitment to a fixed time and place to simplify the otherwise elaborate narrative structure. This happy occasion takes on a bleak tone through the divine intervention of God throughout the novel, who informs us intermittently of how the numerous characters come to die. Yet this novel is also in many ways a celebration of ordinary everyday life, respectful of even the most mundane of the characters' preoccupations. It is bittersweet; hence the title, translated for the English edition as *Sweet Agonies*. I will here explore the characters' joys and agonies in relation to erotic experience, beginning with Chloé who worked as a prostitute like Nita. I will

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<sup>365</sup> Nancy Huston, *Dolce agonia* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2001), pp. 114 and 129. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

then look to the other guests, and to two characters who are not invited to the dinner party. I will examine how their thoughts and comments consolidate or contradict one another, and to what end for marginalised (mainly female) figures.

### **Chloé**

Twins Chloé and Colin suffer from a damaging upbringing, with their mother taking drugs and having sex with strangers in the house, and selling their bodies to whomever she so pleases until they gather the courage to inform the police and leave home (95). Around the age of seventeen, they rent out a room together and start selling their bodies on the street (96). They finally experience real love and pleasure through an incestual relationship with one another (118), cut short when Colin is stabbed to death by a client (96-97). Prostitution is thus presented as a deadly industry, which preys on vulnerable individuals. The same is implied about pornography in this novel, working in conjunction with prostitution. Chloé is irredeemably scarred by her experiences with a client in a peepshow:

il regardait Chloé regarder la scène que lui connaissait par cœur, voyant reflétée, dans la douleur qui déformait les traits de Chloé, l'image de la jolie serveuse attachée à une machine ou, à chaque poussée du sexe de son amant, des garrots se resserraient un peu autour de ses membres et des lames tranchantes s'enfonçaient un peu plus dans sa chair. C'est pas pour de vrai, s'était répété Chloé, encore et encore, elle n'est pas vraiment en train de mourir (et elle avait raison : tout cela n'était évidemment que du faire semblant, de la simulation en studio ; le film était un classique du porno *hard*, pas du vrai *snuff* [...] n'empêche que la scène avait *l'air* réelle, c'est ça qui comptait [...] []). (223-224)

The border between real-life and its representation becomes blurred in this mise-en-abyme, with Chloé experiencing the actress' pain, and her client using her as a vehicle through which to simulate sex with the actress (chapter one). It is the *vraisemblance* of the scene which enables his pleasure, and constitutes the defining function of 'porno *hard*'. This scene undermines the legitimisation of pornography on the premise (widely accepted by pro-pornography feminists) that it belongs to the

realm of fantasy (chapter one).<sup>366</sup> It is in observing this simulated experience that Chloé finds herself fully corrupted ('Ses mains [qui ont stimulé le membre de l'homme] avaient été définitivement corrompues par cette expérience' [224]) and not, with some irony, through real sex with clients or through her rape at the hands of strangers as a child. This is rendered doubly ironic when Aaron compares Chloé's hands to those of Bellini's virgins (192). This scene thus depicts Chloé's horror when forced to imagine herself in the position of a murdered porn-star which, in turn, grants us as an insight not just into her world as a prostitute but (through Chloé's eyes) into the dehumanising and violent processes at stake for porn-stars (chapter one). As was the case with the scripted portrayal of Nita and Milo in *Danse noire*, we adopt the position of viewer and viewed, of the looker and of the murdered woman on-screen. In so doing, like Chloé, we undergo the same violent moment and subsequently sympathise with the sexualised subject on an intimate, bodily level (chapter four).

There are some reprieves in her story, however, which indicate that not all her memories of prostitution are unhappy:

ils prétendaient tous être de riches médecins ou avocats ou hommes d'affaires et leurs propres mensonges les faisaient bander, mais celui-là lui avait répondu qu'il était cultivateur de luzerne – ça, il n'aurait pas pu l'inventer ! [...] [L]'image de cette mauve douceur illimitée avait procuré à Chloé une sensation de paix inhabituelle [...]. (111)

This reference to a pleasurable experience as a prostitute and to an honest client is a means of resisting a traditional victim-status. This is similarly achieved when the narrative voice of Chloé uses imagery to assimilate breast-feeding with prostitution, babies with clients: 'Tous, ils nous bouffent, nous boivent jusqu'à la dernière goutte. [...] Donne-moi une fessée, maman. Fais-moi mal, maman. Punis-moi, maman. Embrasse-moi, baise-moi, donne donne donne.' (182) Prostitutes and mothers alike are milked of their resources, oppressed *donne* one way or the other (the closing epizeuxis alludes to the plural of the Italian *donna*, as well as emphasising the exploitation of women). In this way, the narrative voice of Chloé manages to

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<sup>366</sup> In alignment with that of anti-pornography proponent Dines. Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), p. xxvi. See also Laurence O'toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 43.

problematise what Spector calls an 'us/them, good-woman/whore' dichotomy (chapter one).<sup>367</sup> Marriage is also shown to be similarly oppressive to motherhood:

Oublie ça, qu'il me dit, Hal. Tu n'as qu'à dessiner un grand rectangle noir autour de ces années, et pouf ! À la trappe ! Quelles années, Hal ? Où il est, le sol ? J'avance d'un pas : une trappe. Encore un pas : encore une trappe. (182)

Chloé ironises the idea that she needs saving, and that marriage should equate to her salvation. The same is true of Nita in *Danse noire*, when Dec proposes to her on a certain condition: 'Once we're married, I want this talkin-back to stop, that clear?' (314) This paternalist offer reads more as an ulterior model of patriarchal domination than a promise of emancipation. In both works, we are informed of the dangers of prostitution, and reminded of similar modes of oppression experienced by all women, discrediting paternalist pity and a victim-status.

Likewise, Chloé is not an altogether innocent figure in this novel. Far from it. The other guests, however, are taken in by Chloé's youth and sweet demeanour. Sean says Hal is lucky to have found 'une fille si simple et si douce' (130), and when Chloé absents herself for a while, Hal assumes that she is checking on their baby (100). In actual fact, she is busy snorting cocaine in the bathroom (100). When Chloé falls asleep, moreover, Rachel thinks how peaceful she looks (242), when she is actually experiencing a traumatic dream about herself and her brother mutilating a bird when they were younger (242). Colin also resurfaces in her memory when Sean greets Chloé and Hal on the driveway for the first time, with a knife between his teeth, attempting to mimic a pirate (77). This reminds Chloé of her brother's death. The memory of Colin thus stands in for the harshness of Chloé's past which continues to haunt her in the present day. The dark imagery which accompanies memories of Colin also juxtaposes, in a very visual way, her past traumas with the surface calm that she presents to the outside world. The omniscient narrative voice thus invites us to rethink our preconceptions about guilt, innocence and cruelty, Chloé existing in a limbo state between childhood and adulthood, too little and far too much experience, having 'trop vu' as Arcan had (chapter one).

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<sup>367</sup> Jessica Spector, 'Obscene Division: Feminist Liberal Assessments of Prostitution Versus Feminist Liberal Defenses of Pornography', in *Prostitution and Pornography: Philosophical Debate About the Sex Industry*, ed. by Jessica Spector (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), pp. 419-445 (p. 425).



### Turning Tables

These revelations also help to displace the bias towards Chloé upon her arrival. She is twenty-three years old, nearly half the age of her husband Hal (55). Beth is shocked, and claims Hal is old enough to be her father (72). Sean quickly repudiates this by saying, ‘Je croyais qu’il était trop vieux pour être père’, referring to Beth’s comments about Hal Junior’s birth (claiming that Hal was too old to be having children [72]). This witty repartee makes Beth blush, and dissuades us from quick assumptions regarding the power dynamics between Hal and Chloé. Chloé herself, however, is equally guilty of judging other characters prematurely. Throughout the evening she talks to her brother Colin in her head, and tells him that ‘c’est des gens de la haute. Tout est haut chez eux : leur QI, leur salaire, leur opinion d’eux-mêmes.’ (105) On the one hand, we can sympathise with Chloé’s viewpoint because they were quick to judge her too, and because they are all financially and academically successful. On the other, we know the other guests to think badly of themselves. Throughout the novel, we bear witness to their existential crises and regrets through streams of consciousness. One is thus partly inclined to agree with Katie, who believes it was a mistake to invite Chloé to the dinner party (75). Chloé is critical of the other guests because she does not know them well enough. Looking at Aron for example, the oldest guest, she thinks: ‘Cent ans sur la Terre, et voilà la conclusion qu’il en tire : rien.’ (106) He is at that moment, however, thinking about the murder and deportation of his Ukrainian countryfolk by the Soviets, and about the six-million Ukrainians who starved to death during the famine of 1932-1933 (106). The characters are thus reciprocally quick to judge each other, without taking into consideration their points of view. As onlookers to this dinner party, readers are invited not to take sides at Huston’s literary table. The omniscient narrative voice refuses, in the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to ‘show a people as one thing, as only one thing’, thereby deflecting what Adichie terms “‘the danger of a single story’”.<sup>368</sup>

This is well-illustrated through Sean’s critique of feminism and women’s writing, and by various guests’ responses. Sean criticises books by women, saying that those of the nineteenth century spoke only of gardens and marriage, whilst:

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<sup>368</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘The Danger of a Single Story’ <<https://www.ted.com>> [accessed 8 September 2017]

de nos jours ils racontent tous l'histoire d'une jeune femme, abusée par son père pendant l'enfance, qui, après de multiples vicissitudes dont un avortement, trouve enfin le Bonheur dans les bras d'une autre femme... appartenant de préférence à une minorité raciale. (175)

This self-referential critique of contemporary women's writing makes us question the representation of women in Huston's fiction, in which abortion and racial minorities appear in abundance (above and chapter four). I would argue that this novel provides us with the answers. Firstly: these figures are presented in Huston's fiction alongside dominant figures, and everybody is given a chance to air their views. Equal representation is not achieved through the erasure of dominant voices, but through a dialogue between dominant and dominated subjects. Charles, a recent divorcee, encourages Sean to tell his story owing to 'sa récente bataille téléphonique avec Myrna [qui l']a rendu hypersensible à tout ce qui ressemble, de près ou de loin, à l'arrogance féminine.' (99) Feminine arrogance is a sore topic for Charles, whose ex has won custody of their children and limits his visiting rights as far as possible (53-54). In this way, the omniscient narrative voice does not give precedence to one perspective or narrative of oppression, and Huston finds an exit out of the tricky terrain of speaking for others by enabling the narrative voices to speak *to each other*. Furthermore, the novel looks for points of pain in less obvious places, and reminds us that dominant men can be dominated by women too.

### **The Sound of Silence**

Secondly, and conversely: female figures of this kind require more representation. Returning to the notion of intersectionality, the omniscient narrative voice alludes to prominent forms of domination and suffering. This is shown through Beth's reaction to Sean's statement, and stories that precede it. Beth goes to leave in protest taking her husband Brian with her, and he thinks to himself: 'Si son éclat féministe gache la soirée cette fois-ci [...] je ne lui pardonnerai pas.' (176) We already know Beth to be zealous with her feminist views, the phrase 'cette fois-ci' suggesting she has spoilt other evenings in this way. And yet, we are already encouraged to be on our guard against Brian's anti-feminism because, as we find out earlier, he raped a Vietnamese virgin girl during his service in the US army. The omniscient narrative voice describes it as being part of 'un rite ancien, appris non par les individus mais par l'espèce' (248), a reminder of women's oppression in global terms beyond the

confines of Sean's dining room. Crucial here is the Vietnamese girl's absence from the dinner table; she is unable to put her view across. If she were to, Sean's earlier criticism of women's literature – that it focuses too heavily on abuse stories about women of minority races – would doubtless fall flat.

Silence plays an important role in this novel, and often speaks louder than words. The fact that we never hear the voice of Jody, Sean's ex-wife, emphasises the impact of her departure on Sean (she undergoes an abortion, so that she is sure not to have his child, and leaves him with nothing). She is thus empowered in her silence. One character, however, is arguably disempowered through her voicelessness; Theresa, Sean's cleaner: '*Theresa vient faire le ménage deux fois par semaine, comme elle le fait (dirait-on) pour la moitié de la population de cette petite ville.*' (137) [author's italics]. This same maid appears in the prequel to *Dolce agonia, La Virevolte*, where she is equally silent but ever present, cleaning Derek's house for him before and after his wife Lin's departure.<sup>369</sup> The same novel ends with Lin looking down from a window, seeing 'Une nourrice noire [qui] pousse le landau d'un bébé blanc' and thinking 'Tout cela est à moi.'<sup>370</sup> In both works, the peripheral narrative position of these figures – away from the primary thread – reflects their social marginalisation, and their exploitation by white members of society. Whilst the key protagonists in both novels are preoccupied with their everyday lives and personal histories, as well as a national and global one, the lives of the minoritarian and subaltern women who clean for them and care for their children go unmentioned. As was the case for Nita's daughter and Deena, moreover, Huston avoids speaking for Theresa and 'la nourrice noire' by *not* speaking. Their silence is made all the more apparent in contrast to the vocalicity of the other main characters. When all that can be said has been said, all that is left to do is listen. As the narrative voice of Derek writes, 'On peut choisir de fermer les yeux, non les oreilles.' (64) In this quotation, Huston demonstrates that Spivak's 'listening subject' essential for the subaltern to speak is not only possible, but an inevitability common to all humans. Fiction provides a gateway to this very human connection to others, producing a heteroglossic community to return to Bakhtin's terms, and in Huston's works, multiple 'je's. This is not just key to *Les Variations Goldberg* as Dvorak suggested,

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<sup>369</sup> Nancy Huston, *La Virevolte* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1994), p. 110.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

but just as much if not more so in *Dolce agonia*, where we are encouraged to lend a listening ear to dominant, minority and subaltern subjects alike, during animated conversations at the dinner table, through age-old backstories, and in instances of silence.<sup>371</sup>

## Conclusion

*Danse noire* and *Dolce agonia* incorporate a multitude of marginalised (mostly female) subjects: prostitutes, drug-users, porn-stars, rape-victims and cleaners. Both narratives make it clear that these forms of marginalisation are informed by one's race, ethnicity, nationality, regional background, sexuality and social status, offering as examples indigenous prostitutes (one Cree, one Mohawk), a mixed-race orphan, a Vietnamese victim of war and a black nanny. Self-conscious narration in these novels reflects the difficulty of representing the sexual lives of others such as these, particularly when the narrator has no similar experiences to draw on. Yet several strategies are deployed so that readers may get a little closer to their worlds, and so that the narrators (Paul, omniscient narrators and God) may speak to not for others. A lit-script, subjective camera angles, non-descript signifiers and mise-en-abymes enable us to see the world through the eyes of prostitutes, gay men and porn-stars, vicariously living their erotic experiences; the overlaying of stories (thought and spoken) prevents monolithic and stereotypical readings of characters and their sexual experiences; polyphonic dialogue helps us to see things from different people's perspectives, abetted by a divine being who chairs the conversations to some degree; and the voices of subaltern subjects emerge through silence. In each of these cases, the representation of others resists categorising people as victims or agents, dominant or dominated; underlines intersections between different forms of oppression; and offers an exemplary model of fiction's heteroglossic potential. The premise for my next section will be the exact opposite: that one voice dominates Arcan's fiction, with good reason.

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<sup>371</sup> As such, I believe that I am adding new interpretations of this polyphonic 'speaking to others' in Huston's work to those I established in Polly Galis, "'Speaking to Others'" in Nancy Huston's *The Goldberg Variations* and *Slow Emergencies*, *Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal*, 3.2 (2016), 199-215. (I would like it to be noted that I cite myself only in the interest of defending the originality of this section).

### 3.3 Productive Egotism vs. Paternalist Pity in Arcan's *Putain* and *Paradis, clef en main*

If Ernaux and Huston are wary of how they represent others, it is the author who must be careful in Arcan's case; of how she and her characters are interpreted, given their marginal social positions. She professes that she is in no position to reckon with the suffering of others, because she is wholly committed to testifying to the dangers of the sex and beauty industries (chapters one and two) based on her own experiences. As such, she is less interested in how she speaks about others, and more in speaking for herself and in how others perceive and represent her (chapter four).<sup>372</sup> She nonetheless draws attention to minority and disenfranchised groups, including disabled people and genocide victims, and to sub-sectors within the sex industry (she makes it clear that not all sex workers experience the sex industry in the same way). In speaking for herself, she thus speaks for others. This is true of the omniscient narrative voice of Arcan in *Putain*, and Antoinette in *Paradis, clef en main* (2009). I will begin by examining Arcan's relationship with other women in *Putain*, and her intersectional representation of clients and sex workers. I will then explore how, through her autofictional testimonies, we are granted access (albeit guarded) to the private thoughts and feelings of Arcan as sex worker. I will then turn to *Paradis, clef en main*, a fictional novel about a woman turned paraplegic following an attempted suicide, written in a similar confessional style. I will argue that the key protagonist Antoinette's concerns reflect those of the author, the themes of suicide and disability acting as a metaphor for prostitution, a crippling industry in Arcan's eyes.

#### One of a Kind

Arcan paints the picture of a bleak universal feminine condition in *Putain*, the most intimate, private experiences of the author's reflective according to her of all human experience (chapter two). As she puts it, '[dans] ce qu'il y a en moi de plus intime, il

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<sup>372</sup> Nicole Côté also draws attention to some reductive elements in *A Ciel ouvert*. People of different races are sometimes grouped together under one category ('les "Musulmans"'), the narrative voice generalises national behaviour (referring to Portuguese football fans as though they were representative of all Portugal's citizens), and overlooks the different colonial pasts of the franco-quebécois 'ethnie'. Nicole Côté, 'A Ciel ouvert, de Nelly Arcan : Petit traité de l'économie des relations hétérosexuelles blanches ?', *Intersectionnalités*, 28.2 (2015), 143-161 (p. 155).

y a aussi de l'universel.<sup>373</sup> Arcan implies that she and other women are bound by a shared sense of doom, their eyes meeting with a knowing look: 'on se salue entre nous, la race des sorcières aveugles et des belles-mères jalouses, miroir, miroir [...]'. (24) The reference to stepmothers, witches and mirrors is a recurrence of the fairytale motifs across her corpus, and the religious undertones through the word 'salue', a homophone of 'salut', is reminiscent of misogynist messages in the bible (chapter two). None of the women will be able to offer each other salvation, and their exchange infers that they are resigned to their oppressive, feminine condition, and to their respective roles as 'sorcières aveugles' or 'belles-mères jalouses'.

Arcan's work as a prostitute, however, marks her out from other women as 'une femme de la pire espèce' (43) which abjects her (chapters one and two). Or, to use Arcan's term in *Putain*, it estranges her (chapter four):

Je pense souvent à mes parents qui liront un jour ces pages, qui sait, et que pourraient-ils y voir sinon la révélation de ma putasserie, ma vie de me vendre ici et là pour leur prouver que je ne viens pas d'eux, que je reste étrangère à tout ce qui les regarde, que je fais ce que je veux et surtout ce qu'ils ne voudraient pas que je fasse [...]. (46-47)

At the age of twelve, she claims to have become a stranger to herself too (168), recalling her comments about puberty in 'L'Enfant dans le miroir' (chapter two). Yet this transition to strangerhood signifies a rite of passage that all women must pass through as adolescents, whereas Arcan's transformation as a prostitute forces a break with her family and a wider community of women. It is no doubt owing to this state of abjection that Arcan finds solace in the stars and cosmos (a recurring theme in her corpus), referring to herself in *Putain* as a mere speck of dust: 'si je porte mon regard loin des phénomènes de masse, c'est peut-être qu'on m'a trop souvent répété que je n'étais qu'une poussière dans l'immensité de l'univers [...]'. (68)

Anonymity of this kind is both a comfort to Arcan (wanting to be ordinary), and a threat (not wanting to be forgotten). Arcan puts several elements in place to ensure that she is remembered after her death, being photographed and posting on her blog the night before her suicide (chapter one), publishing several autobiographical and autofictional works during her lifetime to tell people about

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<sup>373</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Putain* (Paris : Seuil, 2001), p. 17. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

herself, and sending a draft of *Paradis, clef en main* to her publishers before committing suicide, as a way of ensuring her legacy (chapter four). However, we know from 'La Honte' that fame as a writer and prostitute brought her shame (chapter two), and from *Putain* that her difference from other women is not so easily erased. Her desire to feel equal to other women is what encourages her to write in the first place, and it is a feeling of inequality and an inferiority-complex which feeds her misogynist fever (18 and 95), a feature of her writing that has concerned and perplexed many literary critics of hers.<sup>374</sup> Arcan's hatred of other women and her sense of competition reaches sado-masochistic heights in *Putain* (173), with Arcan becoming anorexic to differentiate herself from other women (93), stopping only once other girls started, and pushing her to the extremities of mental cruelty: seeking out blemishes on other women (24), exchanging clothes with women in the hope that they will not suit them as well as her (147-148), eyeing them up like men (24), imagining young girls around her as ill, diseased or disfigured (92-93) and 'mentally murdering them' ('je les déteste avec les moyens dont je dispose, avec la force de ce recoin de mon esprit où je les assassine' [95]).

These comments are born out of jealousy and a sense of inferiority, written to regain agency:

C'est vrai, je suis la preuve que la misogynie n'est pas qu'une affaire d'hommes, et si je les appelle larves, schtroumpfettes, putains, c'est surtout qu'elles me font peur, parce qu'elles ne veulent pas de mon sexe et qu'il n'y a rien d'autre que je puisse leur offrir, parce qu'elles ne viennent jamais sans la menace de me renvoyer à ma place, dans les rangs, là où je ne veux pas être. Et si je n'aime pas ce que les femmes écrivent, c'est que les lire me donne l'impression de m'entendre parler [...]. Et puis je les envie de pouvoir se dire écrivains, j'aimerais les penser toutes pareilles, les penser comme je me pense, en schtroumpfette, en putain.

Mais ne vous en faites pas pour moi, j'écrirai jusqu'à grandir enfin, jusqu'à rejoindre celles que je n'ose pas lire. (18)

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<sup>374</sup> Isabelle Boisclair, with Christina Chung and others, 'Avant-propos', in *Nelly Arcan : Trajectoires Fulgurantes*, ed. by Isabelle Boisclair and others (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2017), 11-24 (p. 13).

Arcan is resolute about her worthlessness and inability to be accepted by other, “better” women, only ever *à sa place* among men: ‘j’ai compris que je pouvais être du côté des hommes, de ceux qu’il faut dénoncer, j’ai compris qu’il me fallait y rester.’ (11) In *Putain* Arcan thus presents herself as being disconnected from all women, including prostitutes and porn-stars. The only complicity between herself and her co-workers in this novel is a mutual hatred of men (16) and disdain for their clients (146), and there is no real sense of sisterhood (56), rendering sex work a thoroughly isolating experience. This is reinforced through streams of consciousness, and a lack of punctuation or dialogue in *Putain*, as seen in the above two quotations. This helps us see the world through her eyes (like Nita in *Danse noire* and Chloé in *Dolce agonia*), reflects her mental angst (chapter two), and strengthens the feeling that, in her suffering, she is in some ways very much alone.

### **Other Others**

Even so, Arcan recognises that she is relatively advantaged compared with some sex workers. Arcan works as an escort, talking politics, drinking champagne and eating caviar (31), not needing to walk the streets as others do. I thus have to disagree with Brown’s assertion that ‘dans l’esprit de l’auteure, il n’existe aucune véritable différence entre la prostituée de rue et la prostituée de luxe.’<sup>375</sup> Arcan also studied literature (‘vous [mes clients] ne saviez pas qu’à l’université j’étudiais la littérature’ [131]). Arcan’s wording condemns clients for thinking of her as a prostitute only (‘vous ne saviez pas’), reminding us again of her position as student, prostitute and writer (chapter one), and that, according to Arcan, a great number of prostitutes work in the industry to pay for their degrees (147). Arcan thus draws attention to the number of sex-workers with intellectual pursuits and goals, and to those in a less secure situation who, unlike her, cannot indulge in the finer parts of the job and put themselves at risk to find their clientele.

Arcan is not so sympathetic when it comes to her clients’ suffering, however. On one occasion, she reacts cruelly to a disabled client of hers (134); the only

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<sup>375</sup> Brown’s statement is based on a reading of a passage in *Putain* (31) where Arcan highlights the hypocrisy of her clients, who believe she is not a *putain* simply because she is not a street-walker. Anne Brown, ‘Une Lecture sociologique de *Putain* ou la démythification de la femme corps-sexe’, *Québec Studies*, 41 (2006), 63-82 (p. 77). Though I understand the logic of Brown’s argument, I consider it important to stress that Arcan is nonetheless aware of street-walkers’ comparative vulnerability.



Hungarian man in Montreal, with a stump for an arm (134), thus socially marginalised on two counts. They never speak of his stump (134-135) but Arcan secretly wishes she could confront him about it, to tell him that ‘il est plus glorieux d’avoir un bras amputé qu’une atrophie de bras au bout de laquelle pend une main morte, et s’il ne l’avait pas il pourrait le faire voyager, lui donner une histoire’ (135). Continuing her internal monologue, she asks herself: ‘comment est-il possible d’être ainsi marqué et de n’en rien dire, de faire comme si de rien n’était, de baiser une putain qui n’a jamais rien vu de tel [...] comment peut-on bander et jouir, comment rire, manger’ (136). The client’s comments about her show a similar lack of empathy: ‘il ne veut pas croire que je suis étudiante, il s’étonne que de nos jours, que dans ce pays, on puisse putasser et étudier à la fois’ (135). The function of this mutual misunderstanding, if we can call it that, illustrates Arcan’s selective sympathy and tries to justify it (why should she show him understanding and acceptance, when he is so close-minded about women of her profession?).

Like her father who thinks all men (black and white) are power-hungry and ‘sans compassion’ (70), Arcan grossly generalises the male sex as a selfish and compassionateless force, including those with stumps for an arm and estranged in her country. More surprisingly, she admits that she fails to pay attention to the stories of people in need (of both genders) around the planet. This is clear when Arcan refers to tragedies on the news (69) such as people dying in Rwanda (70). Arcan fails to understand them because she is too preoccupied with her appearance to concern herself with politics: ‘je ne peux pas le comprendre, moi qui ne suis préoccupée que par ma silhouette de schtroumpfette, ma sveltesse de putain qui se maquille avant le petit déjeuner’ (70). This should not be taken literally. This reads as though she were repeating comments made about her in the past, recalling them with bitter irony. Then again, even if Arcan were only able to think of herself, her beauty rituals and job, this could almost be forgiven on the basis of her own intense suffering. Alternatively, it could be seen as a matter of Arcan wanting to focus on what she knows best, similarly to *A Ciel ouvert* where ‘La quasi-absence des “races” autres que blanches dans le Montréal pourtant multiethnique [...] s’explique en partie par le désir d’Arcan de se concentrer sur ce qu’elle connaît intimement.’<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Côté, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

### **Patient Turned Representative**

One way or the other, be it done entirely ironically or not, her erotic works are demonstrably self-orientated. This is especially true of *Putain* which is written in a confessional style, as a stream of consciousness. It is as though she were telling it from an analyst's couch, in keeping with her underpinning commentaries on psychoanalysis. During her visits to her psychoanalyst, she is unable to open-up completely owing to 'la crainte de ne pas bien dire ce que j'avais à dire' (16). She fears he might either read too much into her words, or not take them at face value (82). In any case, she concludes that he will never understand how she feels, no matter how often she tells him (119). It is for this reason that she chooses to write, to 'écrire ce que j'avais tu si fort', and thus to implement her own mode of therapy (16). She leaves us in no doubt that it proves a better alternative: 'ce qui relie les choses dans ma tête est plus solide que la plus éclatante des guérisons de toute l'histoire de la psychanalyse' (96). *Putain* constitutes the outcome of this self-directed healing process, with Arcan as patient and *analysante*. She takes the reins in this way, because ultimately only Arcan can understand what she went through and tell the story accordingly. When writing (in typically abstract terms) about an affair between a professor and his student, for instance, she writes: 'il suffit d'être moi pour le comprendre [...] aimer, putasser, il faut avoir cette habitude de n'être pas à sa place de ne vouloir aller que là où on ne nous attend pas' (132). If Paul struggles to write about Milo's troubled past in *Danse noire* because he has not lived the same experiences (such as taking heroin), Arcan is in a prime position to write about prostitution because she has gone through it herself. In reading her work we can thus catch a glimpse of her *habitus*, and that of other sex workers. Indeed, this literary model of self-therapy enables her to speak for women of a similar – if not the same – ilk (not forgetting her privileges as an escort). As she puts it: 'elles n'iront nulle part mais elles seront entendues, et ceux qui les entendront ne pourront plus ignorer ce que leur folie aura évoqué' (119).

In particular, she wants her readers to perceive her and other sex workers as more than victims. She enjoys wearing heels to look clients in the eye (9), a metaphor for her desire to be treated as an equal, and sex with clients, albeit 'lorsque ma voix parvient à me convaincre' (20). She also prefers being 'en petit chien', 'car il n'y a que les sexes qui se touchent, je peux grimacer comme je l'entends, pleurer un peu aussi et même jouir sans que ça se sache' (27). In this way, sex with clients

can be both traumatic and pleasurable (contrary to common opinion as the emphatic 'même' implies), deflecting reductive and paternalist assumptions. For the same reason, she refuses an offer made to her by one of her younger clients who wishes to save her from a life of prostitution (160). Such an invitation presents itself as another form of patriarchal domination, like Hal's marriage to Chloé in *Dolce agonia* and Dec's proposal to Nita in *Danse noire*. Arcan is similarly keen to emphasise prostitutes' agency, as shown in this satirical line: 'n'allez pas croire qu'elles soient innocentes ou victimes, elles l'auront bien cherché, d'ailleurs elles n'auront fait que ça' (109).

### *Paradis, clef en main*

Antoinette Beauchamp in *Paradis, clef en main* also struggles to see beyond her own pain and suffering. She is wheelchair-bound following a failed suicide attempt that Antoinette recounts throughout the book, and which is organised on her behalf by an underground company entitled 'Paradis, Clef en Main'.<sup>377</sup> Antoinette must pass several tests (known as trials) to prove her suicidal resolve (90) but, in the end, her attempted suicide falls through since the blade never severs her head (she requested that she be guillotined, like Marie-Antoinette [38]). The black humour of this novel aptly reflects Arcan's nihilistic and satirical stance throughout her corpus (chapters one and two), and many of the same motifs recur here too: confession and suicide (Antoinette talks incessantly about her attempted suicide), and motherhood, ageing and the beauty industry (her mother owning a successful skincare company, 'Face the Truth'). The comic tone is also counterbalanced by the fact that Arcan committed suicide in her Montreal apartment, mere days after submitting the transcript to *Coups de tête* (chapter four). On this basis and others, I will here argue that the heroine Antoinette shares common traits with Arcan in *Putain*, and that the themes of suicide and disability reflect the existential pain endured by sex workers.

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<sup>377</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Paradis, clef en Main* (Montréal : Coups de Tête, 2009), pp. 17-18. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

### **Antoinette/Arcan**

Antoinette's diminished sense of self-worth is evidently reflective of Arcan's, epitomised by the heroine's name. Antoinette's mother shortens her name to Toinette which, as Toinette herself points out, is but one letter short of Toilette (11). She is also bulimic (13) as Arcan alleges she was in *Putain* (93), and she watches pornography on her ceiling screen describing the actors as microbes under a microscope (14-15). This is a reminder of Arcan's career path and an analogy close to Arcan's affinity with a speck of dust in *Putain*. During her second trial, Antoinette is also brought to a strip-club (74), and writes:

depuis toujours, le sens de la vie, son origine, sa force d'attraction, son ultime visée, était logé dans le cul ; il fallait l'accepter [...] peut-être au fond n'avais-je pas besoin de mourir, seulement de m'ouvrir au cul, à l'origine du monde, et de baiser un bon coup. (75-76)

There is thus a distinct parallel between suicide and sex work in this novel, in keeping with the depressive and self-destructive tendencies of Arcan's narrators and characters across her corpus working in the sex or beauty industries (chapters one and two). Toinette's mother is also markedly averse to all men, Toinette asserting that:

Je ne lui ai jamais connu d'amants, je crois que ma mère a toujours détesté le sexe, non pas à cause du sexe lui-même, mais parce qu'avec lui viennent les hommes. Ironique, quand on pense qu'elle a voué sa vie à l'apparence, à la surface, à la captation de regards. (125)

This is potentially the same as Arcan who spends her life making herself beautiful for men whom she neither likes nor desires (chapters one and two). Through Antoinette and her mother, therefore, Arcan fictionally narrates her own experiences of an eating disorder, and as prostitute and porn-star.

Arcan's egocentrism does not abate in her fiction either then, and Toinette is equally conscious of her self-orientated gaze. Toinette gets angry when the company's psychiatrist tells her of his problems rather than listening to hers, and asks "est-ce que vous allez vous pencher sur mon cas, oui ou merde ?" (94) This is an evident reference to Arcan's own distracted therapist. Like Arcan, moreover, Toinette's preoccupation with her own suffering and desire to die overshadows her ability to take other people or important political debates into consideration (18). She also exclaims that if she were God, she would be resentful of Job's love for him that

she equates to that of a dog (28) (and dogs, in her opinion, are overly needy [64]). Toinette, like Job, is relentlessly tested (via trials), in the same way perhaps that Arcan feels overburdened by her profession (exemplified by the overbearing streams of consciousness). Unlike Job, however, they are not looking for salvation (chapter two): Toinette goes ahead with her planned suicide and Arcan refuses the hand of a young man, continuing her work as an escort instead.

Both refuse patronising and paternalist forms of help. Toinette gets angry when people pity her and refuses to use a wheelchair that her mother buys for her, which Toinette calls a 'latrine roulante' (115) (a *clin d'œil* to her unfortunate pet-name). Toinette is equally disdainful of any pity she feels for other people, such as for her mother in her dying days (187-189), though this is not to say that she is inexorably unempathetic. On the contrary, she offers to listen to her psychiatrist when he breaks down in a confessional (90), an inversion of the traditional relationship between *analysé(e)* and *analysante*. Like Arcan in *Putain*, Toinette adopts the position of 'listening subject' (to come back to Spivak's terms), as well as the one who is listened to. Although, in *Putain* we never hear the psychiatrist's views: through Toinette, Arcan extends her listening. The psychiatrist in *Paradis, clef en main* is a man of restricted growth, moreover, and thus surprised to learn of Toinette's depression, having always assumed tall people would be happy (111). One could conclude that, in both novels, Arcan is emphasising the need to listen to others, by which we can recognise our own relative fortune. Yet the different treatment of the psychiatrists in each novel points to a narrower lesson: the narrative voices are only prepared to listen to minority subjects. Dominant figures, like the psychiatrist in *Putain*, are purposely ignored.

### ***Les Ecrasés***

Priority is given to those Toinette calls 'les écrasés' (138). This is made clear via a childhood anecdote, in which Toinette's mother walks in to find a topless Toinette in the same room as her uncle Léon. The explanation is innocent enough: Toinette ripped up her t-shirt after being bullied for it at school, and her uncle walks in and endeavours to comfort her. Her mother instantly assumes the worse, the thought of paedophilia and sexual abuse running through her head (131-132), despite their protestations. This reverts back to the idea that 'Elle sait tout du fait qu'elle croit savoir' (139) and substantiates Toinette's view that:

les écrasés ont besoin d'une cause pour se donner une forme, ils attendent cette cause non encore advenue de leurs souffrances à justifier, à comprendre : la force des autres. (138)

Toinette identifies as one of the 'écrasés' who is crushed by 'la force des autres', namely her mother's, the irony being that she was only trying to help. This is doubly ironic given that it is Léon who worsens Toinette's existential situation, planting or nurturing the seeds of her suicidal thoughts (137). Toinette's vision of her mother and others as 'écraseurs' thereby troubles traditional conceptions of care. From a traditional view of power dynamics, Toinette's uncle exploits a vulnerable child by making her his confidante and jeopardising her mental health in the process, whilst her mother is an exemplary moral figure in attempting to keep her alive and well. In the mind of omniscient narrator, however, impositions of care of this kind prove to be as damaging as a lack of care. This is an apt metaphor for feminist action against pornography and prostitution which, as pro-sex campaigners make clear, is often underpinned by patronising, paternalist attitudes (anti-pornography feminists adopting the position of saviour), and which often leads to sex workers being placed in a more vulnerable situation (with stricter laws, for instance, forcing women to choose less open, secure spaces to work).<sup>378</sup>

It is altogether possible that Toinette's uncle is a fictional representative of Arcan's own father, who imposed his pessimistic view of the world on her. Indeed, when explaining how her father's fatalistic rhetoric convinced her to become a prostitute, Arcan states that he pushed her into a 'chaise roulante' (*Putain* 166). In addition, the oedipal imagery which Arcan uses to allude to her relationship with her father in *Putain* (chapter two) is on a par with the incestuous confusion in *Paradis, clef en main*. In the same way that the omniscient narrative voice invites us to pause before we think the worse, we are asked to do the same for Arcan's father, and in both cases the portrayal of the narrators' fates requires that we think about victimhood in looser terms. Toinette and Arcan willingly participate in their own destruction.

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<sup>378</sup> Theresa A. Reed aka "Darklady", 'Private Acts vs. Public Art: Where Prostitution Ends and Pornography Begins', in *Prostitution and Pornography*, pp. 249-257 (p. 257).; O'Toole, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.; Lynne Segal, 'Does Pornography Cause Violence? The Search for Evidence', in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. by Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, intro. by Carol J. Clover (London: British Film Institute, 1993), pp. 5-21 (p. 16).

Then again, it is questionable how much free will they truly possess. In the strip-club during her second trial, for instance, Antoinette decides to ignore the driver waiting to collect her outside. Instead, she chooses to stay and drink because ‘j’étais prise dans les filets d’un destin tricoté, su à l’avance, dans mon dos. Donc: *basta*.’ (78) Even her decision to leave the cab and get drunk, she concludes, has already been accounted for by the company (78). Everything is pre-determined, regardless of whether she chooses her course of action. This ambiguous narrative style is emblematic of that which runs through *Putain*: is Arcan an agent or victim of her demise? How far is one able to engender one’s fate? And how far are we ever abreast of the structures operating around us, and of how they impact on our lives? (chapter two) Arcan oscillates between a critique of patriarchal values and her upbringing, which set her up for a life as a prostitute, and self-criticism for what she deems a personal choice, based on an innate propensity to *putasserie* (just as Antoinette believes herself and her uncle to be innately born with the will to die [7-8]).

A compromise in the form of ‘adaptive preference theory’ is one possible solution to this predicament. Adaptive preference theory supports the notion that we are free to make life decisions, but that we adapt our preferences and lifestyles in accordance with the options available to us in a given society and epoch. Clare Chambers helpfully provides the example of women who wear heels: whilst a woman is free to choose whether to wear them or not, her choice is informed by social pressure to appear a certain way that ‘perpetuates women’s inequality in a way that is unjust.’<sup>379</sup> To apply this to the field of sex work, it stands to reason that in a world where women’s employment opportunities are less plentiful than men’s, for instance, Arcan is more likely to opt for work as a prostitute, as Antoinette is to end her life in *Paradis, clef en main*. As such, Arcan’s portrayal of prostitution, both literally in *Putain* and figuratively in *Paradis, clef en main*, draws attention to the dangers of sex work (that lead for instance to depression and suicide [chapter one]) and to the oppressive structures that lead women into this career in the first place (rising student fees, for example, and the pressure on women to conform to feminine ideals in the media and beauty industry [chapters one and two]). The narrative voices in both novels also admonish a wide selection of *écraseurs* (clients, psychiatrists,

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<sup>379</sup> Clare Chambers, *Sex, Culture and Justice: The Limits of Choice* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 2008), pp. 29-30.

mothers and, in a subtler manner, feminist campaigners). If the women in Arcan's works 'give in' to a certain extent, they do not give up, and they certainly do not give in quietly. Like Toinette says, 'Depuis que je ne marche plus, je me suis mise à parler. Un vrai moulin. Un flot continu de paroles.' (14)

## Conclusion

It is therefore clear that Arcan and Toinette must produce their own accounts of oppression, *speaking for themselves* so that they are not *spoken for*, *self-representing* so as not to be *misrepresented*. Arcan's experiences as a prostitute, her literary studies and role as a writer place her in the optimum position to write about her status as abjected other in *Putain*. Arcan conveys her isolation through celestial imagery and semantic fields of cruelty (self-inflicted and towards fellow females), and draws us into her world via streams of consciousness. This limits misinterpretations on the part of the reader, such as those which occur on her psychiatrist's chair. In *Paradis, clef en main*, the theme of suicide serves as an extended analogy for the impact of the sex industry on its employees, and the heroine Antoinette is on some level Arcan's fictional alter-ego. Her relationships and conversations with other characters encourage us, like Arcan in *Putain*, to allay our pity, and rethink common definitions of victimhood. Neither Arcan nor Toinette, on the analyst's couch or in the confessional booth, asks to be saved (chapter two). These texts thus teach us more if we understand the narcissistic form to be productive rather than reductive. On the one hand, Arcan is reluctant to represent those less fortunate than herself – those disabled, deformed or even victims of genocide –, and prostitutes working from street corners, unlike herself as a white, educated escort. On the other, like Toinette, Arcan focuses on her own suffering because her story so desperately needs to be uttered, and the egocentric form ensures it is heard and preserved. The effects are long-lasting, as Boisclair *et al.* eagerly acclaim: 'l'étoile d'Arcan brille encore dans le paysage littéraire'.<sup>380</sup> Like Huston's Milo,<sup>381</sup> she is a minority subject conceived of as an 'étoile filante', and the hope is that her autofiction will throw some light on other falling stars.

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<sup>380</sup> Boisclair *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>381</sup> A shooting star goes by during one of the film scenes, and Paul asks whether it could be Milo. Huston, *Danse Noire*, p. 255.



### Conclusion

Ernaux, Huston and Arcan display a range of strategies to speak for others, and to represent a variety of female bodies, gendered identities and sexual experiences. Ernaux takes advantage of *non-lieux*'s non-specificity to observe the lives of ordinary, diverse citizens. Her *journaux extimes* show us that, in spite of our differences, we are all connected by shared desires and sexual norms. Some people, however, are excluded by consumerism and *non-lieux*, including the homeless and veiled women. Ernaux also underlines the problems involved with representing people of a different creed or colour. To tackle this divide, Ernaux monitors her thoughts and behaviour, and draws on her experiences to connect with others. In so doing, she produces a multi-faceted account of sexual desire, gendered identity and the female body in public spaces, that acknowledges difference and maps out points of connection between ourselves and others. In Huston's case, complex narrative forms (merging the visual and textual, textual and meta-textual) allow readers to see scenes through the eyes of the characters, and omniscient narration coupled with polyphonic dialogue enables the characters and narrative voices to speak to each other. As for subaltern figures without a voice in society, they emerge through silence. In this way, Huston speaks to not for minoritarian and subaltern women, namely: prostitutes, porn-stars, sexual abuse sufferers and carers. As for Arcan, she does not pretend or try to understand the suffering of those in a less fortunate position (street walkers; disabled people; genocide victims), though she does acknowledge them, producing an intersectional account of sex work. It is ultimately in confessing her own past that she can best serve sex working and female communities, by granting the reader an insight into her world. In the end, the narratives of Arcan and Toinette, through streams of consciousness, analogies and metaphors, indicate that it is the *écraseurs* who are truly sinful (chapter two). I will continue exploring this relationship between the reader and writer in the next chapter, placing additional emphasis on their bodies, in relation to a textual one.

## Chapter 4

### **Corps and Corpus**

The body has been a central topic thus far, including spectral, medicalised, cosmetically enhanced, animalistic, mediatised and abject bodies, with significant focus on the female (hyper)sexualised body. I have explored how bodies affect and are inflected by dominant sexual discourses, as well as sexual development, difference, pleasure and experience more generally. I concluded that Arcan, Ernaux and Huston depict the body in counter-discursive and intersectional ways, drawing both from hegemonic imagery and alternative, feminist schools of thought. In this chapter, I will additionally consider the concept of the text-as-body. I will examine how the written text takes the form of a body and how the authors translate corporeal experience through literary language. How is the word made flesh, and the flesh made word, and how does this meeting between reader, writer and the body allow for an erotic encounter? And to what extent is it productive from a feminist standpoint? Writing the female body has been a key point of concern for feminist writers, in terms of articulating one's own body and that of other women. Female bodily experiences including menstruation, sex, virginity, pregnancy, abortions, ageing and the menopause have historically been deemed private, unspeakable issues, making it difficult for women to find what Marie Cardinal called 'les mots pour le dire'.<sup>382</sup> This has been rendered all the more problematic by a male-dominated literary tradition, 'les mots' being colonised by men and portraying bodily experience from a phallogentric perspective. The representation of women's bodies has thus been curtailed by social gender inequality – with the female body being deemed inferior and unrepresentable – and the limits of language. Second-wave feminists turned this dilemma on its head by celebrating women's bodily difference instead, and laid the foundations for a feminine way of writing by which women could write specifically feminine experiences. In this way, private shame was exchanged for collective affirmation of what it meant to be a woman. This movement's legacy is keenly felt in the work of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan, whose narrative strategies reflect the ongoing struggle involved in writing the female body, and whose personal histories and those of their characters dialectically reflect those of other women.

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<sup>382</sup> Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* (Paris : Hachette, 1977)

I will address how these conceptions of the body have evolved across the authors' bodies of work, my scope spanning much further than it did in the previous chapters. The focus has thus far been geared towards fiction, autofiction and autobiography, and I will here compare these elements to non-fiction and meta-fiction too (as I did to a lesser degree in my analysis of Huston in chapter two), with references to paratexts, including peritexts (paratexts within the main body of the text, such as epigraphs and footnotes) and epitexts (those outside of the text, such as author correspondence or interviews). In so doing, I will be able to conduct a study of the body in their works in light of their self-claimed aims and narrative perspectives, and in terms of how they represent their own bodies. I will begin with Ernaux's *journaux réfléchis*, *L'écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*, *Le Vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte* and *L'Atelier noir*, in which Ernaux discusses her narrative style, form and content, and her literary motives and motivation. A study of these reflexive works will help me ascertain how she herself perceives the text-body relationship operating in her work, and how this matches up to readers' experiences. I will also briefly discuss her media appearances, drawing on the extensive studies of Thomas and Elise Huguény-Léger, but will not examine the remainder of her written corpus (comparative references aside) having already addressed a wide breadth of her literary texts, ranging from her first fictional novels to her latest *journaux extimes*. In the case of Huston, I have studied an equally broad range of her corpus, focussing mainly on theory and prose. I will here examine a less easily classifiable work, *Poser nue*, an autobiographical and critical piece by Huston produced together with the artworks of Guy Oberson, where Huston theorises her and others' experiences as nude model. I will take advantage of its co-authored and cross-disciplinary form to explore the relationship between the (writing) muse and artist, the written and pictorial body, and those of men and women. I will then analyse *Instruments des ténèbres*, in which the depiction of the female body moves beyond the Madonna-whore complex central to Huston's corpus, and where the relationship between the writer's and the textual body (the work of fiction) is closely logged through the narrative voice of Nad(i)a the storyteller. More than any other of Huston's novels, this allows an insight into the merging of the writing and written body. In both sections, I will refer back to Huston's non-fictional work on the body, gender and sexual difference outlined in chapter two, to explore the similarities and inconsistencies between her non-fictional and fictional bodies of

work. For my analysis of Arcan's corpus, I will examine both the author's body as it comes to be presented in the media – in televised and radio interviews – and in the paratext of her novels (Seuil's jacket covers), and the body more broadly as it appears in her newspaper chronicles, short stories and *Putain*. This will allow for a cohesive overview of the text-body relationship in Arcan's œuvre, and is of fundamental importance given the philosopher-whore dichotomy that underpins Arcan's work and her critical reception, with the authorial body ever preceding the textual one.

#### 4.1 Cutting Truths in Ernaux's *Journaux réfléchis*

This section consists in a review of Ernaux's reflexive works through which she outlines her writing practice and goals, *L'Écriture comme un couteau* (first published in 2003), *Le Vrai lieu* (2014) and *L'Atelier noir* (2011). The first two comprise retrospective evaluations of her existing works and narrative styles, and the third is composed of notes taken by Ernaux at the time of literary creation itself, displaying her evolving thought process. All three of these *journaux réfléchis* offer alternative readings of Ernaux's works, and succeed in bridging private and public realms, theory and practice.<sup>383</sup> They predominantly reflect Ernaux's recurring preoccupation with accessing a form of truth through writing, one which can account for her history and 'l'Histoire avec sa "Grande Hache"',<sup>384</sup> and which can allow a meeting between reader and writer. Central to her work is a self-conscious conservation of material, bodily experience, and a seemingly incompatible desire to speak of an external reality, that of other people. This section will focus on this paradox and how it is presented in these reflexive texts, starting with how the autofictional or autobiographical text acts as an imprint of and onto the author's body, reflecting and informing Ernaux's experiences, values and desires. I will then explore the connection between the writing and reading subjects, and how this is inflected by class and social standing (chapters two and three). Finally, I will address what this means in terms of feminism (Ernaux being often labelled a woman writer, against

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<sup>383</sup> And Annie Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot*, with postscript by Marguerite Cornier (Paris : Mauconduit, 2013), which I have chosen not to comment on because it focusses on space and place over sex and the body.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

her better judgement)<sup>385</sup> and *jouissance*, examining what happens once the intimate is made public in this way, particularly the act of writing itself.

### **The Word Made Flesh and the Flesh Made Word**

In spite of the social grounding and impact of Ernaux's work, it is important to remember that its material is drawn from Ernaux's lived, often bodily experiences, hence her chosen autofictional and autobiographical form throughout her corpus. In *L'Écriture comme un couteau* Ernaux recalls how, as a child, she wrote down her name, age and date on a piece of paper, and then boxed and buried it to be discovered by future generations.<sup>386</sup> Writing for Ernaux serves the same purpose, granting permanence and longevity to her life story, Ernaux going as far to say in *Le Vrai lieu* that 'tant que je n'ai pas écrit sur quelque chose, ça n'existe pas.' (*Vrai* 19) Writing gives flesh to memory: a textual re-membering. This visceral characteristic of writing is a given for Ernaux, words spurting from her like blood (she must feel them 'jaillir').<sup>387</sup> Though her past is partly reflective of others of her sex, Ernaux differentiates between 'la représentation d'une femme comme les autres – et celle qui écrit, devait écrire.' [author's emphasis] (*Atelier* 69). She is "aware" of herself as a writing subject whose experiences inform the written content and form. The text passes through her, Ernaux asserting that 'il me faut ce moment où la sensation arrive, dépourvue de tout, nue. Seulement après, trouver les mots.' (*Écriture* 40). Her choice of form, an autobiographical one, is crucial to this auto-representation, Ernaux explaining that 'Les romans nous font croire que la vie est dicible en roman. Rien n'est plus une illusion. Fausseté absolue de "l'autofiction"' (*Atelier* 191-192). The inverted commas here emphasise autofiction's illusionary nature. No literary representation of reality is ever disembodied, which is nowhere better shown than through the autobiographical form.

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<sup>385</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Le Vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte* (Paris : Gallimard, 2014), p. 57. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>386</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau : Entretien avec Frédéric Yves-Jeannet*, with postscript by Annie Ernaux (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), p. 115. All subsequent references, by page numbers in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

<sup>387</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'Atelier noir* (Paris : Busclats, 2011), p. 174. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

Conversely, writing intervenes within Ernaux's life and upon her body, slicing 'comme un couteau', hence the title for her earlier published interview with Yves-Jeanet (*Vrai* 81). Ernaux asserts that since 1967, writing has functioned as a form of 'dévoilement' for her (*Ecriture* 58), and she defines literature as 'le bouleversement, la sensation d'ouverture, d'élargissement' (*Ecriture* 113), assimilating her own writing process to one of cutting, starting with the selection of 'situations qui m'ont marquée profondément', and ending by 'creuser, élargir la plaie, hors de moi.' (*Vrai* 108) The written act thus constitutes an unpicking of the authorial body by the writer, emphasised by the macabre and sensual imagery. As Ernaux states in *L'Atelier noir*, the most motivating point of departure for a new book is the theme of sex or death (*Atelier* 94). Writing is thus a cathartic, therapeutic process, that cuts and opens up the authorial body for analysis, and serves as a platform upon which to play out one's most intimate and traumatic experiences, laying bare the sexual and spectral body (chapter one). In fact, Ernaux speaks of writing as the problem of 'aller jusqu'au bout, être pute, etc.' (*Atelier* 69), thus assimilating the need to write with prostitution.

Ernaux is careful to distinguish her literary approach from psychoanalytic therapy, however. For one thing, unlike most visits to a therapist, the confessional nature of autobiography – if it can be called that – entails the revelation of other people's stories.<sup>388</sup> The difficulty of autobiography or even fiction for Ernaux lies in her representation of others (chapter three), particularly her loved ones, and she describes *Les Armoires vides* as 'un texte qui déniait les valeurs littéraires, crachait sur tout, blesserait ma mère.' (*Ecriture* 48) Secondly, writing leaves a more lasting trace than the spoken word, and there is thus an inherent danger to written confessions: that they may be picked up and read by others. In *Le Vrai lieu*, we are informed that Ernaux's mother destroyed one of her diaries – in which she recounts first meeting her ex-husband – and any letters which she received from friends during the same period. Ernaux suggests that her mother did so out of love for her, to protect her daughter from the shame that such bodily confessions might incite (40-41). Not only is Ernaux's mother the guardian of her body and future as we learn in

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<sup>388</sup> Though some may say the same is true of psychoanalysis.

*Le Vrai lieu* (39),<sup>389</sup> moreover, but so too does she police and censor her written body of work. Her mother looks upon books with quasi-religious awe, even instructing Ernaux to wash herself before handling them as though they were sacred objects (*Vrai* 49), yet this secret destruction of Ernaux's private diary and correspondence indicates that writing is not to be revered as a matter of course. There is a firm division between good and bad writing, the sacred and the shameful. The most liberating attribute of Ernaux's corpus is to be found in the overcoming of such qualitative divides. For her, all writing is precious, be it private or public, and the only shame inherent to writing lies in *not* writing (*Vrai* 96). This realisation enabled her to overcome her initial shame at the start of her literary career, when she considered employing a pseudonym for the release of *Les Armoires vides* (ironically marketed as a work of fiction), saying that 'je devais assumer ce que j'avais écrit, assumer le regard de l'entourage familial et professionnel.' (*Ecriture* 48) More than therapy, therefore, writing allows (personal and collective) shame to be sublimated (chapter two).

It is for this reason that Ernaux remains miraculously unmarred by this public exposure of hers and her family's private life. In *L'Ecriture comme un couteau* Ernaux describes the age-old magic trick of a woman in a box, where she comes out unscathed albeit sawn in half (*Ecriture* 16). Ernaux likewise goes under the knife, which she herself wields, being sliced by her words and axed by History with a capital 'Hache' (the pun is not insignificant) to come out on the other side more complete than she was to begin with. This is partly owing to the fact that, especially in the second half of Ernaux's autobiographical collection (from the advent of *Passion simple* [1991] onwards), writing for Ernaux is less about iterating 'le "moi" ou de le "retrouver"' than about losing it within 'une réalité plus vaste, une culture, une condition, une douleur, etc.' (*Ecriture* 23) The emotive experiences from which the literary content is built become imbricated within a bigger picture, reducing their harmful potential. Ernaux defines writing as a mode of transubstantiation, by which something immaterial can emerge from the material (*Ecriture* 103). Writing, unlike therapy, is not so much about finding a truth within us (albeit inspired by our past

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<sup>389</sup> Ernaux explains that her mother was a feminist before feminism first became conceptualised in concrete terms, yet this stopped at sexual freedom. Such a freedom was impossible to envisage before the authorisation of contraception and the Veil law legalising abortion (*Vrai* 39).

experiences) as about looking outwards. As she puts it, autobiographical writing is anything but a “travail sur soi” (*Écriture* 55). One might deduce that this proves more fulfilling in being a tangible and complete reworking of her past experiences, marking the moment of having come through to the other side of one’s therapy and producing ‘quelque chose qui existe vraiment dans le monde en dehors de soi.’ (*Vrai* 91) This is not to say that her personal story is trivialised or depersonalised, contrary to psychoanalysis which Ernaux claims ‘transforme en banalités conventionnelles les secrets douloureux de l’existence individuelle’ (*Écriture* 56) (like Arcan’s therapist [chapter two]). Ernaux’s narratives achieve the opposite: venerating seemingly banal life-events by incorporating them across her corpus (as she puts it to François Busnel in an interview for ‘La Grande librairie’, ‘tout c’qui m’est arrivé au fond [...] est très banal’<sup>390</sup>), granting them a wider significance that transcends her own life experiences.

This end-product is all the more important because it is reflective of other people (chapter three). Ernaux is continuously preoccupied with the coalescing of her story with History (*Atelier* 81), and the ‘réalité plus vaste’ which Ernaux speaks of is only arrived at by a dialectical interplay between her authorial confessions and the lives of others (chapter three). Not least the readers, Ernaux pointing out that a great deal of readerly disaffection stems from a lack of connection between reader and writer (*Vrai* 50). This interplay results in the creation of ‘une maison. Où quelqu’un peut entrer, comme dans sa propre vie à lui’ (*Vrai* 91), hence why Ernaux refers to her writing project as a type of construction rather than confession or contrition (another step away from the psychoanalytic tradition) (*Vrai* 92). She claims that the ideal of writing to which she aspires is ‘de penser et de sentir dans les autres, comme les autres – des écrivains, mais pas seulement – ont pensé et senti en moi’ (*Écriture* 42), and that the greatest compliment she can receive is for people to say they recognised themselves in her literature (*Écriture* 101). Thomas’ introductory study of Ernaux’s work and reception shows us that a large number of positive reviews consist in just that type of response, particularly well-illustrated in readers’ letters to the author.<sup>391</sup> Day even asks whether Ernaux might feel

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<sup>390</sup> François Busnel, ‘Annie Ernaux : Ecrire la vie’, *La Grande librairie*, Direct 5, 12 January 2011.

<sup>391</sup> Lyn Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience* (Oxford:



“vampirisée” by her readers.<sup>392</sup> This is especially true, as Thomas elucidates, for her female and (had-been) working-class audience, with the typical reader (if there is one) being a middle-aged woman and teacher of working-class origins.<sup>393</sup>

Inversely, we saw in her *journaux extimes* how Ernaux learned more about her own body and sexual identity through her observation of others, with her body demonstrably absent from the autobiographical narrative (chapter three). As Ernaux confirms in *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, ‘*Nous en apprenons plus en effet sur l’appréhension d’un monde commun en observant la quête menée par d’autres qu’en poursuivant avec difficulté, toujours à deux doigts d’y renoncer et sur le bord d’une falaise, notre recherche propre.*’ [author’s italics] (9). Furthermore, Ernaux states that we often look for differences more than similarities (*Écriture* 9), whilst we saw the opposite to be the case in her *journaux de l’extérieur* with Ernaux keen to assimilate her bodily experiences with those of others (such as abortion and buying lingerie) (chapter three).

### **A Limited Reach: Class and the Body**

There is nonetheless a limit to this bodily encounter between reader and writer. In her *journaux extimes* Ernaux recognises her inability to identify with abject individuals such as the homeless or HIV-AIDs victims because of her own relatively privileged position as a white writer (chapter three). In her *journaux réfléchis*, Ernaux makes it clear that some readers would be similarly unable to identify with the narrative voice in her corpus, that of a working-class woman. In fact, they are purposefully kept at arms’ length through Ernaux’s carefully chosen narrative form (as with Arcan and male clients of prostitution, chapter four). Ernaux describes her *écriture plate* as ‘La seule écriture que je sentais “juste”’ with ‘une distance objectivante, sans affects exprimés, sans aucune complicité avec le lecteur cultivé.’ (*Écriture* 34) Despite the frankness of Ernaux’s narrative style – the authorial body seemingly opened up to the reader – it is carefully constructed to enable a *rapprochement* between the narrating *je* and a select readership only, purposely

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Berg, 1999), p. 111.

<sup>392</sup> In this interview Ernaux replies in the negative, saying such readers find strength from her books, not from her as such. Loraine Day, “Entraîner les lecteurs dans l’effacement du réel”: Interview with Annie Ernaux’, *Romance Studies*, 23 (2005), 223-36 (p. 235).

<sup>393</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

excluding others. It is perhaps for this reason that her *écriture plate* and minimalist style have been criticised by many established literary critics of the French metropole<sup>394</sup> (though, as Thomas points out, she remains respected by the literary community in spite of her resistance to canonical literary tradition<sup>395</sup>).

Sara Ahmed's book *Strange Encounters* provides an additional line of analysis. Ahmed writes about embodiment as a form of inter-embodiment, suggesting that we become aware of our own bodies only once we come into contact with those of others: "my body" is possible in its particularity only through encountering other bodies, "your body", "her body", and so on.<sup>396</sup> This tactile recognition feeds our conception of the stranger, as an additional distancing between self and other: 'some skins are touched as different to other skins.'<sup>397</sup> The stranger is not untouchable, but there is a difference between bodies in general (through which we recognise our own), and those of strangers, whose skin against ours feels strange. Ahmed's understanding of the stranger is one who is differentiated from the familiar, privileged body who is at home, such as the white man (who is at home everywhere).<sup>398</sup> She therefore concludes that the stranger's body marks the boundary which the familiar, privileged body cannot cross (being a different body), but which also reminds them that they are still at home, marking what she terms the 'temporarily assimilated as the unassimilable within the encounter'.<sup>399</sup> In Ernaux's work, the bourgeois middle-class reader is made to feel a stranger by coming up against the critical and impermeable body of the author, just as she felt in her childhood and early adulthood (chapter two). The form and content construct a border by which the cultivated reader may recognise their privilege (their at-homeness in traditional French literature), and their inability to cross into Ernaux's alternative home (her aforementioned *maison*), her stranger's body unassimilable. Class is a sensitive issue (*Vrai* 25) in both senses of the word, particularly for the young Annie. Class shame is associated with physical memory in Ernaux's work, as

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<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>396</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 46-47.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

with her hands at school that smell of 'l'eau de javel', betraying her family's cleaning habits,<sup>400</sup> and during her first sexual experiences and termination of pregnancy (chapters one and two). Ernaux's idiosyncratic *écriture plate* allows for a rewriting of these bodily traumas, and acts as a fleshy gate, that either invites or repels the visiting reader.

It is unsurprising then that Ernaux considers form and subject matter to be intermeshed in her work, and goes 'jusqu'à dire que le danger est, fondamentalement, dans la manière d'écrire.' (*Ecriture* 49) In the end, Thomas points out, the literary and pedagogic communities in France and elsewhere cannot help but admire Ernaux for both (there is no reason, for one, why a sense of class-resistance should cause displeasure on the part of the cultivated reader; quite the contrary). Her minimalist form and focus on working-class conditions has guaranteed her a place within the French canon, her texts now studied in schools nationwide, and featuring heavily in international academia.<sup>401</sup> The main cause of frustration where Ernaux's corpus is concerned – her minimalist writing style – is thus also the reason for her success. Further, her insistence on remembering her working-class roots, among other things, means she is generally well-respected by high-profile literary critics, as a person as well as a writer.<sup>402</sup> Elise Huguency-Léger observes comparable contradictions in Ernaux's paratexts: Ernaux's media presence is geared towards a middle-class audience, yet she is admired for her writing that befits a working-class optic. This discrepancy, Huguency-Léger asserts, reflects Ernaux's 'entre-deux' position in life and literature (*Vrai* 26).<sup>403</sup> The body of the author, as Ernaux presents it during media appearances, thus cements her middle-ground class position in her written corpus.

To come back to her textual body, feminism is equally interwoven with class issues (chapter two). Gender difference for Ernaux is just as social as it is sexual (*Vrai* 58) (chapter two). Ernaux's primary issue with feminism – at least that of the seventies during her budding years as a writer – was the implication that all women

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<sup>400</sup> Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot*, p. 22.

<sup>401</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 142 and 158. See also Pierre-Louis Fort, 'Entretien avec Annie Ernaux', *The French Review*, 76.5 (2003), 984-994 (p. 984). He claims she has attained 'le statut de classiques'.

<sup>402</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>403</sup> Elise Huguency-Léger, 'Entre Conformisme et subversion : La Portée du paratexte dans l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 26.1 (2008), 33-42 (p. 41).

experienced oppression in the same way (chapter three). She emphasises the extent to which bourgeois women experience their femininity differently to working-class women and represent different ways of being a woman, her mother-in-law and mother for instance being cut of very different cloth and symbolising two very different models of womanhood (*Vrai* 58) (chapter two). The same is true of Ernaux's experience of abortion, Ernaux drawing attention to wealthy young girls travelling to Switzerland for their (much less risky) terminations (*Vrai* 58). By extension, we should not forget that hers is different again from those of the shop-employees in *L'Évènement* whose hospital stay is much less forgiving than hers, though both are admitted for their efforts to abort (chapter two). Ernaux's narration of her most intimate experiences, and depictions of the female body, are thus always tightly connected to a broader class consciousness. As Ernaux asserts in *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, right from *Les Armoires vides* she never disassociates the intimate from the social, thus finding it difficult to apprehend why her work is so often categorised under the *intime* bracket (138-139).

### **Intimacy and Feminism**

Even in *L'Évènement* where she spoke of 'le sexe traversé par la sonde, les eaux et le sang, tout ce qu'on range dans l'intime', it was always with the law of the time in mind (*Écriture* 139). After all, it was this law that placed her in such a perilous position in the first place. Her body and work serve as a synecdoche of women's history particular to the time and place in which she grew up; France during the latter half of the twentieth century. In *Le Vrai lieu*, she asserts that women's history is connected to their bodily oppression foremost, and that until 'l'autorisation de la contraception et la loi Veil' (*Vrai* 39) (rendering women 'Aussi libre qu'un homme'<sup>404</sup>) women were submitted to le 'pire enchaînement à la procreation' (*Vrai* 57), hence her affiliation with Gisèle Halimi's *Choisir* movement and MLAC (Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception) from 1972 to 1975 (*Écriture* 68 and 95).<sup>405</sup> Not for nothing does she place the former Simone next

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<sup>404</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris : Gallimard, 2008), p. 95.

<sup>405</sup> Though she never signed the Manifeste des 343, being in a compromising position at the time. Her husband was an executive and, besides, she considers herself to have been a 'nobody' back then. Lyn Thomas, 'Voix blanche? Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms

to de Beauvoir in her imagined ‘panthéon’.<sup>406</sup> Her literature is clearly marked by a shared, growing awareness amongst women in 1960s France, which Ernaux illuminates in her quasi-historical opus *Les Années*, that they had not been entitled to the same sexual and creative freedoms as men.<sup>407</sup> Her self-acclaimed objective in writing *L’Évènement* for instance consisted in debunking the correlation between abortion and indignity and, whilst she cannot be sure if she succeeded, she is satisfied that it at least provoked a ‘dérangement’ (*Écriture* 92). It stands to reason then that, as Ernaux herself attests, writing proves itself to be her best political gesture and gift (*Écriture* 57). This contribution to the feminist cause notwithstanding, Ernaux cannot be called a traditional feminist. She refuses to associate with any particular feminist faction (deemed too radical for some and not enough for others [*Vrai* 80]), discrediting the MLF (*Mouvement de libération des femmes*) and a growing lyrical tendency towards a celebration of the feminine, which she esteems ‘le pendant du populisme’ (*Écriture* 95).<sup>408</sup> In fact, Ernaux’s inability to be accepted by feminist groups acts as a key motor for her writing practice (*Vrai* 80), her literature thus distinct from women’s writing in a collective, collaborative sense.

Ernaux explains that it is because of her upbringing that she finds herself unable to associate with the post-1968 move towards women’s writing, asserting that:

Je crois que cette double influence, de mon éducation et du *Deuxième sexe*, m’a prémunie contre l’idée, très répandue après 1968, d’une littérature spécifique des femmes. Je lisais, j’entendais, qu’on écrit avec son corps, son corps de femme. Quand je me suis mise à écrire, je n’ai pas eu l’impression d’écrire avec ma peau, mes seins, mon utérus mais avec ma tête, avec ce que cela suppose de conscience, de mémoire, de lutte avec les mots ! Je n’ai jamais pensé, voilà, je suis une femme qui écrit. Je ne suis pas une femme qui

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and the Challenge of Intersectionality’, in *Making Waves*, ed. by Margaret Attack and others (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2019), pp. 205-223 (p. 205).

<sup>406</sup> Ernaux, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>408</sup> These critiques overlook the fact that sexual difference was only valorised by a fraction of the MLF, most controversially by the Psych et Po faction (who copyrighted the acronym, causing much confusion in terms of what the MLF stood for). Diana Holmes, *French Women’s Writing, 1848-1994* (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 209.

écrit, je suis quelqu'un qui écrit. Mais quelqu'un qui a une histoire de femme, différente de celle d'un homme. (*Vrai* 56-57)

She is averse to the label 'woman writer' – what she calls a *de facto* imposition of sexual difference – which she claims often entails the assumption of a predominantly female readership, and none of which is applied to literature by men (*Ecriture* 90). She also asserts in *L'Écriture comme un couteau* that women are often compared to other women writers, and men studied in their own right (85). Marking sexual difference in literature thus entails sexual inequality. Yet she acknowledges that 'J'ai une histoire de femme, par quel miracle s'évanouirait-elle devant ma table de travail, ne laissant qu'un écrivain pur' (*Ecriture* 91). Her understanding of women's history, however, stems not from a particular feminist collective or from theory in isolation, but from her own bodily experiences and her childhood. Her experiences of feminism are lived at the level of the body first, her mother's, before she even begins to make sense of it through words (read [Beauvoir] and written [*La Femme gelée*]). Ernaux explains that it was only in the 1970s during the emergence of the feminist movement that she first appreciated the unusual nature of her upbringing (with her mother and father subverting traditional gender roles [*Ecriture* 93; chapter two]), grateful to her mother for such an education (*Vrai* 56). Until then, feminism had no word for her, only 'un corps, une voix, un discours, une façon de vivre, dès ma venue au monde : ceux de ma mère.' (*Ecriture* 93) On a less positive note, it is by dating boys that she initially comes across extreme gender inequality when, she writes, 'j'ai frôlé le désastre' (*Ecriture* 93). Ernaux's literature, symptomatic of *la condition féminine* and modes of female oppression in twentieth-century France, borrows its feminist gaze not from politics or theory (Beauvoir's aside) but from the body, particularly in relation to her mother's body and her clandestine abortion (both being intimately yoked to class status [chapter two]). In turn, books (her own and those of others) impact immensely 'sur mon imaginaire, sur l'acquisition, évidemment, du langage écrit, sur mes désirs, mes valeurs, ma sexualité' (*Ecriture* 76).

This creation of an intimate oeuvre (or 'auto-socio-biographie' to follow Ernaux's logic [*Ecriture* 23]) constitutes her primary political act. Ernaux explains

that *Passion simple* was condemned for social and sexual obscenity,<sup>409</sup> and women criticise the lack of *pudeur* or emotion in her literature, whilst male authors writing in a similar way, such as Houellebecq, rarely suffer such reviews (*Ecriture* 97). In addition to finding ‘les mots pour le dire’, then, Ernaux’s work also serves to appropriate for herself what she calls in *Les Années* ‘les mots d’homme qu’on n’aimait pas, *jouir, branler*’, or a sense of legitimacy in employing a language deemed masculine. As she explains in *Les Années*, women commonly inherited their mothers’ embarrassment with regards to sex and its articulation, opting for clean, anatomical terms like vagina and penis.<sup>410</sup> She thus addresses, as Carol Sanders outlines, ‘the hitherto unsayable’, voicing ‘the pent-up feelings and expressions of generations of women.’<sup>411</sup> It is this prohibition on naming certain things which pushes her ‘à l’écrire justement’, as she readily admits to Fort.<sup>412</sup> Thomas also shows that reader responses point to negative judgements of the sexualisation of an older woman, as well as of excessive sexual desire,<sup>413</sup> whilst media critics focus on sexual promiscuity and the incorporation of personal sexual experiences within the written text.<sup>414</sup> Narrating the minutiae of one’s erotic experiences, of one’s infatuation with a man, and privileging a male visitor over one’s children is still not deemed proper for a woman (particularly of mature years) even in our professedly liberated age. In Ernaux’s words, ‘La révolution des femmes n’a pas eu lieu. Elle est toujours à faire’ (*Vrai* 55), and one sympathises with her sense of illegitimacy when writing *Passion simple*: ‘Si je n’écris pas, ne tente pas ce livre, c’est que je pense, je crois, que je n’en suis pas capable, surtout parce que je suis une femme.’ [author’s emphasis] (*Atelier* 84) The backlash of her female readership, criticising her for being insufficiently emotive and overly explicit, betrays a lingering conservative conceptualisation of *écriture féminine* that reinforces misogynist stereotypes about

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<sup>409</sup> Academic criticism against Ernaux’s erotic literature targets the banality of its content, its brevity, crudeness and ‘*érotisme vide*’. Isabelle Charpentier, ‘De corps à corps. Réceptions croisées d’Annie Ernaux’, *Politix*, 7.27 (1994), 45-75 (p. 52).

<sup>410</sup> Ernaux, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>411</sup> Carol Sanders, ‘Stylistic Aspects of Women’s Writing: The Case of Annie Ernaux’, *French Cultural Studies*, 4 (1993), 15-29 (p. 23).

<sup>412</sup> Pierre-Louis Fort, *op. cit.*, p. 987.

<sup>413</sup> Thomas, *Annie Ernaux*, p. 123.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150 and 154-155.

women.<sup>415</sup> The erotic genre is thus interpreted differently depending on the sex of the author, justifying Ernaux's reluctance to be deemed a woman writer on the one hand, and demonstrating the counter-discursive potential of publishing intimate works as a woman on the other (chapter one).

To summarise, Ernaux resists such labels as *œuvres intimes* or women's writing, because she considers the intimate to be socially informed, and because she is acutely aware of the restrictive connotations for the writer that come with the word woman, and with the essentialist concept of *écriture féminine*. It is for this reason amongst others that she eschews collaboration with individual feminist factions. Being feminist, for her, means writing about what she wants, and thus in the freedom to choose her literary alliances: 'je pense que c'est une femme qui écrit ce qu'elle a envie d'écrire. J'approuve cette liberté. Ça, c'est *féministe*.'<sup>416</sup> [author's emphasis] It is in writing about her intimate bodily experiences, moreover, that she reflects the social condition of women, and the scribing of her personal bodily experiences as a woman therefore constitutes her most powerful feminist move. With more than a little irony, her visceral literary approach recalls the instructions of Chawaf that we write with mucus, sperm and milk,<sup>417</sup> and her form and content (criticised by men and women alike for its minimalist and explicit nature) is 'volcanique', tearing up what Cixous called 'la vieille croûte immobilière, porteuse des investissements masculins' and shattering 'les batis des institutions'.<sup>418</sup> Counter to this argument lies the fact that, were she a man, her erotic works would not have received such criticism, and her erotic language thereby reveals a discrepancy between the reception of men and women's publications. Much of her volcanic potential lies not in finding revolutionary content, but in publishing an erotic tract as a woman.

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<sup>415</sup> Such as women being irrational beings. Mary Jacobus, 'The Difference of View', in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 10-21 (p. 14).

<sup>416</sup> Annie Ernaux, 'Entretien avec Pierre-Louis Fort', in *Annie Ernaux. Un Engagement d'écriture*, ed. by Pierre-Louis Fort and Violaine Houdart-Merot (Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2015), pp. 201-207 (p. 205).

<sup>417</sup> Chantal Chawaf, 'Linguistic Flesh', trans. by Yvonne Rochette-Ozzello, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. and intro. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), pp. 177-178 (p. 178).

<sup>418</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la méduse et autres ironies* (Paris : Galilée, 2010) p. 59.



### **Passion, *Jouissance* and Transformation**

Readers' reaction to her erotic triptych overlooks the wider purpose of Ernaux's erotic language, criticised for its overly explicit and insufficiently emotional language (*Ecriture* 97). *L'Atelier noir* offers us the clearest insight into her rationale when writing *Passion simple*. Ernaux explains that 'Il y aura la passion vécue et la passion écrite, mais la "vécue" n'existe nulle part. Je ne peux faire qu'un récit racontant comment cette passion ressemblait à l'écriture d'un livre.' (*Atelier* 81) This reflects the difficulty of finding 'les mots pour le dire' since our lived experiences are not directly narratable. Ernaux's writing project goes beyond a purely feminine optic though, as she endeavours to do justice to passion itself, what she deems "'l'expérience" par excellence' (*Atelier* 79), so much so that writing and passion become one for her. She says she lived her passion as she lives her writing (*Atelier* 81), and vice versa I would argue, since the essence of writing is equally non-presentable. As she puts it in *L'Écriture comme un couteau*:

Si j'avais une définition de ce qu'est l'écriture ce serait celle-ci : découvrir en écrivant ce qu'il est impossible de découvrir par tout autre moyen, parole, voyage, spectacle, etc. Ni la réflexion seule. Découvrir quelque chose qui n'est pas là avant l'écriture. C'est là la jouissance – et l'effroi – de l'écriture, ne pas savoir ce qu'elle fait arriver, advenir.' (*Ecriture* 136)

Like psychoanalysis (to come back to my earlier points), writing brings up one's past experiences and respective insights, yet writing offers something that cannot be arrived at by reflection alone: an unprecedented substance that culminates in a state of *jouissance* and *effroi*.

Thomas employs the term *jouissance* to refer to the impact of Ernaux's 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.', a short article for Gallimard's *L'Infini* journal in which she recounts a vivid post-coital scene. After making love, Philippe places a sheet of drawing paper beneath her so that her menstrual blood and his semen can flow onto it, comingling to form a blurred, damp picture. According to Ernaux, it resembles a large-mouthed woman, the northern lights or sunset, the figure fading off at the edges.<sup>419</sup> The image is a haptic one, like those on-screen studied by film theorist Laura Marks, where the viewer is obliged to move their eyes across the

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<sup>419</sup> Annie Ernaux, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.', *L'Infini*, 56 (1996), 25-26 (p. 25).

screen's surface before realising exactly what they are looking at.<sup>420</sup> In this written scene, the reader participates in the writer's viewership, sharing in its haptic quality through the writer's roving eyes. In a similar vein, Thomas asserts that this scene makes for a pleasurable rendering of borders between self and other, those usually considered a threat by women. The indistinct outlines of the woman are safely contained within the page, like Ernaux in her writing; menstrual blood which transgresses the border of the female sex is applied in a playful not menacing way; and differences in terms of age and gender are no barrier to this creative moment, allowing the female reader to recognise the social limitations common to their sex, and that resistance is possible. All of this makes for a 'satisfying closure' on the part of the reader.<sup>421</sup> I cannot wholly concur, however, with Thomas' tentative description of this closure as a moment of *jouissance*,<sup>422</sup> since the concept of closure and *jouissance* are incompatible. Quite the reverse: *jouissance* constitutes according to Barthes the impossible, untenable, unspeakable text which is 'hors-plaisir, hors-critique'.<sup>423</sup> There is a certain level of *jouissance* at work, though, in the closeness between reader and author. Readerly pleasure is where 'mon corps va suivre ses propres idées', whereas with Ernaux's corpus the reader's body follows not their own ideas but the gaze of the writer, sharing in *her* satisfaction.

When it comes to her own work, Ernaux is always sure to report on her levels of satisfaction, through the reworking or reviewing of previous œuvres. She distinguishes between the function of her *journaux intimes*<sup>424</sup> and other works, categorising them in terms of the private and public, life and literature, passivity and activity, incomplete and complete, *jouissance* and transformation, saying 'J'ai plus besoin de transformer que de jouir.' (*Écriture* 25) In her opinion then, the (active) editing and rehashing of her (private) intimate journals to produce a (complete) public/ation allows for a transformation of her works: one that is even more fulfilling than the *jouissance* key to her private oeuvres, no doubt because it moves towards what she terms 'une vérité plus vaste'. If this is what Ernaux deems the most

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<sup>420</sup> Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), pp. 162-163.

<sup>421</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp.101-102.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>423</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris : Seuil, 1973), pp. 32-33.

<sup>424</sup> The only published versions being *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* and *Se perdre*.

satisfying point for her as a writer, an understanding of how and why she does this could be even more so for readers, revealing the thought process that binds the two types of literature. These extratextual analyses in her *journaux réfléchis* allow for an ulterior mode of *jouissance* to come into play, the reader-writer relationship intensified to the umpteenth degree, and providing an additional angle to the aforementioned story/History dialectic (we are granted backstage access to the story behind the story). It is through her reflexive journals that Ernaux unveils the writerly knife with which she carves her body throughout her corpus, allowing for the ultimate moment of transformation from the reader's perspective.

This is particularly significant in so far as each *journal réfléchi* reveals patterns in Ernaux's evolving formal and stylistic approach. Ernaux points to a perspectival shift from the first to the second half of her written corpus (with an increasingly outward-facing narrative gaze, and a decreasing complicity with the cultivated reader from 1991 onwards [*Ecriture* 23 and 34]) and professes to a plurality of voices (*Ecriture* 31). Her *journaux réfléchis* thus weave together her multiple textual bodies, as well as solidifying the existing, *jouissant* bond between the reader and writer, story and History, in each published work. This marks the final step in the transformation of the author's body: *l'écriture comme une aiguille*. This is an extension of Barthes' 'hyphologie', hyphos being a spider's web and tissue. Barthes recalls how spiders weave a web, undoing themselves in the process as the string emanates from their bodies.<sup>425</sup> The same is true for Ernaux's work, as the writing web-marker's *je* becomes dissipated into the lives of others, through a conscious unravelling of the authorial body in the text, and beyond that, through a weaving together of her multiple webs, those public and private, complete and incomplete. Put another way, she connects the dots between multiple *hyphos*, drawing a map for the reader to make sense of her publications and of her as an author. As Kawakami asserts, 'the most complete – and most formally innovative – version of her "self" [...] emerges from considering all of these different and at times contradictory portraits.'<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Barthes, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>426</sup> Akane Kawakami, 'Annie Ernaux, 1989: Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection', *Nottingham French Studies*, 53.2 (2014), 232-246 (p. 233). Ultimately, Ernaux believes it is loss which connects all of her works (chapter one). Pierre-Louis Fort, *op. cit.*, p. 994.

## Conclusion

This text-ile interweaving of numerous *journaux*, readers and writer, all starts with the body of the author.<sup>427</sup> Lest we forget, Ernaux explains that ‘Il faut que le livre à écrire fasse un trou dans mon existence pour en toucher, trouver, d’autres.’ (*Vrai* 79-80) Her body must be punctured first before she can cut the reader or thread her extratextual needle (to run with Barthes’ metaphor: her *hyphologie* is an interpersonal one). The value of her corpus lies in finding ‘les mots pour dire’ her past, her desires, her passion, and as her *journaux réfléchis* reveal, in giving her body over to the unknown and revelatory capacity of writing: the ultimate moment of *jouissance* or *effroi*. In turn, the pleasure inherent in reading Ernaux’s texts derives from the reader’s association with these bodily and sexual experiences of hers, as the reception of Ernaux’s work corroborates, and the intimate reveals itself to be a profoundly social phenomenon. Even the cultivated *lecteur* finds themselves touched: impressed or alienated. Likewise, Ernaux delineates her aversion to essentialist forms of feminism and *écriture féminine*, yet her ambition to narrate her past desires, sexual and bodily experiences, and to evacuate the element of indignity with which they are commonly associated, culminates in a powerful feminist move, tackling women’s public shame and oppression through the narration of her private life. Her *journaux réfléchis* also reflect her difficulty in writing passion and sex as a woman, emblematic of women’s struggle to voice their bodily reality, an issue central to second-wave feminism and the subsequent celebration of the feminine in women’s writing (*Ecriture* 95), and still the source of gender inequality in terms of reader reception. Ultimately, however, this struggle and Ernaux’s creative process more generally touches male as well as female readers, and acts as a house for anyone to walk into. Her body is our body. And if the writing process for her proves transformative because she can ‘aller jusqu’au bout’ (*Atelier* 69), a reading of Ernaux’s corpus, in light of her reflexive works, allows for a transformative meeting with the body of the author, suturing theory and practice, private and public, self and other, *jouissance* and transformation, *corps* and corpus.

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<sup>427</sup> As Barthes reminds us, ‘*Texte veut dire Tissu*’. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

## 4.2 Mus(e)ing, Musical and Magical Bodies in Huston's *Poser nue* and *Instruments de ténèbres*

In the previous chapter, I explored the difficulty of speaking to other women through literature, and of portraying their lived experiences. I will here examine Huston's narration of her own past in *Poser nue* (first published in 2011) and the narrator Nadia's self-conscious preoccupation in *Instruments des ténèbres* (1996) with the production of literature more broadly. In chapter two, moreover, I concluded that Huston emphasises women's material being-in-the-world in *Professeurs de désespoir* and *Journal de la création*. According to Huston, menstruation and pregnancy regularly remind women of their potential to give birth to another being, reinforcing their corporeal connection to life and its generation, and enabling women to identify as both self and other. Women are thus biologically tied to a female temporality, one which privileges life over death, and hence idealism over nihilism. This also allows for a positive mode of objectification in Huston's opinion, one by which woman is neither hyper- nor desexualised, neither Madonna nor whore (as they are in pornography and the media which she outlines in *Reflets*, *Carnets* and *Mosaïque*). In this chapter, I will continue examining the relationship between women and their bodies in Huston's work, turning my attention to the female nude in *Poser nue*, and to a plethora of 'magical' bodies in *Instruments*. I will explore how women experience their nudity or nakedness differently according to the given aesthetic context and their social status (chapter three), and how Huston blurs the boundary between multiple dualisms through her bodily representations: Madonna-whore, self-other and idealism-nihilism (chapter two), mind-body, reality-fiction, reader-writer, immanence-transcendence and the im/material. In these works, Huston also cuts across diverse disciplines, drawing connections between sculpture and writing; plaiting theory, anecdotes and illustration in *Poser nue*; and comparing music with literary creation throughout *Instruments*. I will thus examine the manifold ways in which Huston complicates the concept of the literary text too, as well as the border between that body and those of the author, reader, narrator and fictional characters. As for what this teaches us from a feminist standpoint, I will demonstrate how these complex portraits of the female body simultaneously challenge and play on those circulated across centuries of Western thought and art, highlighting and deflecting the stigma and danger attached to prevalent female roles and labels (nude models, porn-stars, witches, healers, 'lavandières' and prostitutes).

### *Poser nue*

Nancy Huston's corpus is as varied as it is prolific, including fourteen novels, numerous short stories and children's books, countless theoretical and philosophical essays, four theatre productions and two screenplays. Poems also feature in a number of her works, and she plays with formal and generic structure across her corpus. *Poser nue* thus comes as no surprise, where the author's theories and anecdotes sit alongside life drawings by her partner at the time and to date, Guy Oberson, whose work features on the cover of Huston's novel *Infrarouge* (chapter one) and *Bad Girl* (2014).<sup>428</sup> The written narrative consists in Huston's commentaries about her experiences of nude modelling as a young woman, and those of author, Anaïs Nin, and photographer, Lee Miller; all examples of nudes turned creators. She draws parallels between their experiences and the practice of pornography and prostitution; the only tenable difference in her eyes between the role of nudes in these sectors and that of fine art being one of subjective, aesthetic judgement. Huston also outlines her views on sex and sexuality more generally, as well as the female mind and body, sex and sexual difference (chapter two). She thus builds a thesis about the female nude based on her own experiences, which is emblematic of women's place in the history of art and the sex industry. Huston herself appears on the front and back covers, stepping back into her role as nude model as an older woman, and pre-empting the woman-centred narrative. Oberson's drawings on the inside, however, are mostly composed of male nudes (including self-portraits), along with intertwined bodies, two tulips, and hands, chins, heads and feet, lacking a clearly gendered owner. I will begin by outlining Huston's gendered theorisation of the female nude and sex/uality within artistic practice and society, before exploring the ways in which Oberson's images complement and contradict her key messages, their creative bodies wrestling with one another to produce what Huston terms 'une troisième entité'.<sup>429</sup>

### **Nude and Un/amused**

This so-called third entity is introduced on the first inner sleeve of this work, and its meaning revealed on the last: 'le désir entre vous [nue] et lui [artiste] fera naître une

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<sup>428</sup> Nancy Huston, *Bad Girl* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2014)

<sup>429</sup> Nancy Huston, *Poser nue*, with drawings by Guy Oberson (Paris : Chemin de fer, 2017), front sleeve. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

troisième entité qui n'est pas enfant mais effigie, magiquement vivante...' (46) In other words, the potential desire that can emerge between muse and artist is not only incidental but crucial to the work of art. The artworks displayed in *Poser nue* constitute the love children of Huston and Oberson's aesthetic, erotic encounter, born out of 'une telle électricité' between them (46).<sup>430</sup> In the same passage Huston describes the artist's observing eye, 'le regard à la fois intense et impersonnel de l'homme sur votre peau, vos formes.' (46) Instead of condemning the male gaze, Huston goes on to write: 'Sentir qu'ensemble vous faites quelque chose de fort.' (46) The act of observation is in this way depicted as a shared process, as is the final art piece, admonishing simplistic readings of the muse-artist dynamic. This also avoids reducing the female nude to the position of victim. Whilst, as we will see, Huston outlines the dangerous implications of nude modelling for women, she stresses the paradoxical pleasure to be gained from the reciprocal seduction of muse and artist. In this case, both are active participants in the production of art and desire, and it becomes impossible to conceive of the muse-artist relationship as a disembodied practice: as art for the sake of art, purely and simply. The opening and closing sleeves thus pre-empt the foreshortening of the space between muse and artist, writing and drawing, victim and perpetrator (chapter three), and the body and artistic creation which defines this work, where women and men feature as nude muses.

It is interesting that Huston should focus so resolutely on the female nude then. To start my analysis of her arguments I would like to begin at the beginning, with the title *Poser nue*. To pose is to perform, be that self-evidently or in a subtler way, when we are asked to look natural (chapter one). The term repose is also noteworthy, meaning not to pose again but to rest, recalling the typical position of the (predominantly female) nude within Western art throughout the ages, lying down horizontally with their eyes directed towards the painter. The performative term pose thus also goes hand in hand, linguistically and socially speaking, with the standardised position performed by women in art as sexualised object of the male gaze. Huston implies a correlation with this aesthetic performance and that of porn-stars, asking why it is that artworks by Toulouse-Lautrec, Schiele and Picasso are revered (25), and those of porn-producers and unskilled artists vilified on the grounds of their lewd content. She demands why one work should be deemed less

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<sup>430</sup> The man mentioned in the given quotation is a sculptor, not Oberson.

morally sound than another because of a lack of artistic ability (50). Why should the choice to *poser nue* be valued differently – ethically and morally speaking – depending on the aesthetic and social context in which a woman performs her nudity? Angela Carter argues that ‘there is no question of an aesthetics of pornography. It can never be art for art’s sake. Honourably enough, it is always art with work to do.’<sup>431</sup> Huston extends this perspective to the field of fine art, proposing that high art is ‘always art with work to do’ too, albeit coupled with a potentially higher aesthetic value. Huston reminds us that we have all too often confused the aesthetically tasteful with the morally sound, or artistic interest with asexual disinterest. She thus makes us rethink the condition of the female nude not just within pornography, erotica or trash imagery, but in the realm of high art.

Huston’s anecdotal style reaches out to the reader in the same open manner, making for a simultaneously intimate and accessible narrative. This is reinforced by the use of second-person narration, and such phrases as: ‘les modèles de peintres – vous le savez, ayant vous-même fait partie de ce sous-ensemble de l’humanité – pensent à mille et mille choses.’ (13) The sleeve and opening references to specific times and places (starting with a dinner party) provide sufficient contextualisation to disillusion us from assuming any direct communication between reader and narrator (we know the narrative voice to be speaking to the younger Nancy), yet the repeated ‘vous’ builds an ulterior bond with all those ‘vous [qui ont] fait partie de ce sous-ensemble de l’humanité’. A complicity is built between the writer and readers belonging to the same subsection of humanity, the ambiguity of its size and breadth making room for individuals from more marginal sectors of society (chapter three).

In alignment with this viewpoint, Huston compares nude models to prostitutes, asserting that modelling scenes of all types occur ‘comme la prostitution’ (26). Not for nothing does Huston refer to nudes and prostitutes as apples (26): both are esteemed to be objects of consumption. The apple acts as a synecdoche, recalling the figure of Eve the temptress, and thus inferring which side of the Madonna-whore divide nudes and prostitutes belong to. Huston paints a scenario in which a woman is invited to pose for two male artists:

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<sup>431</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Polemical Preface: Pornography in the Service of Women’, in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 527-539.



Deux hommes, maintenant, vous sourient. Au beau milieu de l'après-midi, dans un appartement tout en haut d'un gratte-ciel à Manhattan, ils partagent avec vous un verre de champagne et un joint de marijuana. Vous savez bien que ce n'est pas ainsi que se crée la peinture. Ici, l'art est un prétexte. C'est un voile léger et transparent que l'on a jeté sur la situation pour l'adoucir mais qui ne parvient pas à en dissimuler le caractère réel. [...] Votre cerveau vous transporte ailleurs, comme il sait si bien le faire. (16)

Huston thus problematises the dividing line between male-female relations in prostitution and nude modelling. Her conceptualisation of the female nude is therefore wide-ranging, encompassing prostitutes and porn-stars in addition to artists' models like herself, and her personal anecdotes come to stand in for a host of other women (as with Arcan and Ernaux, chapter four). The wandering mind of the figure towards the end is also a reminder of Huston and other nude models' capacity for deep thought ('[qui] pensent à mille et mille choses' [13]), 'musing' connected this time to a form of escapism during implied sexual services. As we learn from Natacha in Arcan's *Petit papa Noël : Conte pour adultes*, daydreams allow prostitutes to travel elsewhere in their minds whilst their bodies remain otherwise engaged. Natacha attempts to recall 'ses visions cosmiques de généalogies de fruits et de paysages polaires' as a smokescreen to the hotel room and the body of Father Christmas against hers.<sup>432</sup> Despite the apparent vulnerability of the young woman in this Manhattan scene moreover (with there being two men in a skyscraper, inferring phallic dominance and a lack of easy exits, making for a modern, real-life version of Rapunzel in the tower), the narrative voice asserts that 'Personne n'est vraiment maître de la situation.' (15) Huston thus blurs the boundary between the role of nude model and prostitute, and problematises easy readings of victimhood (chapter three).

Huston indicates that those who usually occupy the space of looked-at, nude models and sex workers both, can look back with strength, as is the case with Lee Miller much to her partner's chagrin: 'Quand Man Ray le voit [son art], il disjoncte.' (35) It is for this reason that Huston made the heroine of *Infrarouge* a photographer, to 'prendre une revanche sur les A., B. et Z. de ce monde, tous ceux qui feignent d'oublier que même les jolies têtes contiennent... des yeux.' (Poser 59) This is not to

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<sup>432</sup> Nelly Arcan, 'Petit papa Noël : Conte pour adultes', *Journal de Montréal*, 24 December 2001.

say that she disapproves of traditional gender roles within artistic practice. On the contrary, she states that it is important to maintain sexual difference in modelling: ‘le mot sexe dit bien ce qu’il veut dire, à savoir scission. On ne mettra jamais de l’ordre là-dedans et c’est tant mieux...’ (56) In keeping with this view, she suggests that the pleasure derived from posing naked stems partly from the recognition of one’s bodily beauty, and its effect on the male artist. She herself enjoys feeling the artist’s eyes on her body, as he maps her skin and forms (45). Though Huston reminds us that the nude can think, look and talk, she does not downplay the significance of a nude’s body, beauty and status as looked-at object when it comes to this role, or indeed the enjoyment to be gained from it. If love allows one to be appreciated for one’s mind as well as one’s body (chapter two), Huston does the same for the nude model here. If anything, this project enables a true marriage of minds and bodies between Huston and Oberson, with the two sharing an intellectual oeuvre which draws its inspiration largely from the human body. Their genders are also, as discussed, unmistakable. In summation, Huston insists that we subvert but retain gendered and bodily dualisms, intimating that women look back in anger *as* women, and maintaining that mind and matter matter. Punk poet and sex-positive feminist Kathy Acker suggests that: ‘we still live under the sign of Descartes. This sign is also the sign of patriarchy. As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others.’<sup>433</sup> Consequently, employing what Acker calls ‘*the language of the body*’<sup>434</sup> amounts to rediscovering our female voice under a patriarchal system.

Cross-disciplinary comparisons also shed some light on mind-body dualisms in Huston’s corpus as a whole. Having modelled for a sculptor, Huston explains that ‘Rien ne vous a si bien préparé pour votre futur travail de romancière que le travail calme et concentré du sculpteur.’ (46) The sculptor drew inspiration from her naked body, whilst she felt inspired by the creative space of his atelier, one in which the body’s movements are never rushed (‘Les gestes se font, pleinement, patiemment’ [46]) and where ‘Touiller fait partie de sculpter, nettoyer aussi, et écouter la radio, et

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<sup>433</sup> Kathy Acker, ‘Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body’, in *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies*, ed. and intro. by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), pp. 20-27 (p. 27).

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

parler de la pluie et du beau temps...’ (46). The nude looks and listens too, drawing inspiration from a space in which ‘la beauté doit se deployer dans un espace et un temps indéfinis.’ (46) Huston thus outlines her multi-generic initiation into the world of the writer, acting as her own literary muse, and the content of her narratives drawing from experiences of nudity and sexuality.

Perhaps ironically given Huston’s comparisons between her body and those of prostitutes, *poser nue* is a matter more meaningful for some women than others (chapter three). This is best explained, in my opinion, by turning to Huston’s astute distinction between nudity and nakedness in the English language: ‘alors que *nude* implique le recul, le regard qui cadre et met à distance, *naked* fait sentir toute la vulnérabilité d’un corps dévêtu, exposé, intime ou intimidé...’ (41-42). Unlike the French all-encompassing term *nudité* then, the two anglophone alternatives emphasise the difference between a comfortable *nudité* (nudity) and a form of *nudité* of which we are uncomfortably conscious (nakedness). One has only to think back to Genesis when Adam and Eve ‘were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed’<sup>435</sup>, before they recognised that they were naked, covered themselves with fig leaves and hid from God amongst the trees of Eden.<sup>436</sup> Berger also underlines the fact that, ‘They became aware of being naked because, as a result of eating the apple, each saw the other differently. Nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder.’<sup>437</sup> Our sense of nakedness – the self-conscious element of an otherwise innate and unconscious state of undress – is produced by our witnessing of others’ nakedness.

Being nude is thus akin to developing a second-skin, one to make our nakedness bearable, as with Elke who undresses so casually in *Une Adoration* (chapter two). By logical deduction, a sense of nakedness can be experienced when fully clothed. Such is the case with Nad(i)a in *Instruments*, whom I will introduce in due course. Clothes are ‘une torture constante’ for her,<sup>438</sup> and a source of public humiliation, exemplified when a slice of pizza falls into the lining of her coat, oil

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<sup>435</sup> Genesis 2.25, *Holy Bible*, King James Version (London: Collins, 2011)

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. 4-7.

<sup>437</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 48.

<sup>438</sup> Nancy Huston, *Instruments des ténèbres* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1996), p. 127. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the thesis for the remainder of this section.

dripping onto the post office floor whilst she pays for her stamps (59-60). We as readers can commiserate with her ‘Tragédie de la poche trouée’ having all experienced similar instances of public exposure, when our bodies or the material contingencies of our everyday realities betray us.<sup>439</sup> The comic capitalisation of ‘Tragédie’ is doubly ironic, since such banal incidents are anything but trivial: they are signs of our shared, bare humanity. This begs the question as to where art stands in relation to our *nudité*. Can it clothe us, so that we may be comfortable naked? Can it dress us so that we may undress a little more freely? I will return to these issues during my analysis of *Instruments*.

Huston, for one, seems to be more than comfortable with her nudity when it comes to art. She claims to have been unphased by a public film-screening in which she appears naked, being ‘heureuse de sa beauté’ (46) This indicates that Huston was able to adopt a certain critical distance vis-à-vis her body image, admiring ‘sa beauté’, *its* beauty (that of her body-as-work-of-art) not her beauty *per se*. This corresponds to Berger’s conceptualisation of the nude. In response to Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude*, in which Clark distinguishes between nakedness (being without clothes) and nudity (a form of art), Berger adds that nudity is not confined to art. It is altogether possible, for instance, to enact nude gestures or poses.<sup>440</sup> According to him, ‘To be naked is to be oneself’ whilst to be nude ‘is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object to become a nude.’<sup>441</sup> To be nude, then, is to be naked and not naked, clothed and unclothed at the same time, because our own nakedness goes unnoticed:

To be naked is to be without disguise.

To be on display is to have the surface of one’s own skin, the hairs of one’s own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.<sup>442</sup>

In Huston’s own words, her beauty ‘fait partie de la beauté du monde’ (46), since as Berger proposes her nakedness becomes imbricated within the universal genre of the

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<sup>439</sup> A particular betrayal for Nad(i)a who, we will see, resists her bodily drives and instincts.

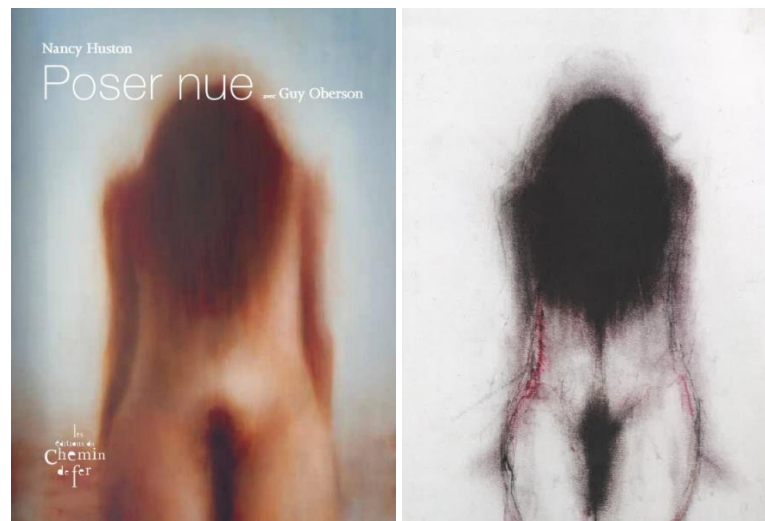
<sup>440</sup> Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*

nude, being ‘treated as a thing or an object of abstraction.’<sup>443</sup> In being studied as the object of artistic study, she is clothed by the skin and hairs of her own body; her body becomes a disguise.

This is further exemplified by the jacket portraits of Huston for the second edition. The front image, an ochre watercolour on bamboo paper depicting Huston from mid-thigh upwards, is hazy like many of Oberson’s works, the edges dissolving into the surrounding space and forming a halo around its subject. The result is a spectral one (chapter one and four), as the title *Hante-moi, hante-moi encore* substantiates.



### 6. Hante-moi, hante-moi encore (front and back covers)

This haziness also makes it difficult to discern individual features, aside from Huston’s striking red hair which is also that which covers her face, making her anonymous. Her body is faceless and borderless, and she is thus representative of a female nude. This is equally true of the back image of the same name, where it is impossible to establish with absolute certainty whether we are looking at Huston’s front or back. One would assume the latter, to fit its structural positioning (the back page), yet the diagonal lines on each side of the body suggest a shrinking perspective and two hands placed to the back of the frame, implying either that Huston is sitting facing forwards with her arms back for support, or bent backwards with her head and arms facing away from the viewer. The entre-jambe shadow could also represent either pubic hair, or an exaggerated darkness between her buttocks and thighs, the back playfully performing the front. These portraits of Huston are therefore ones in

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<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

which she is there and not there, exposed and off-limits to the viewer, herself and not herself. Huston as nude is thus inseparable from a long line of other nudes, a visual inversion of the chorale de femmes in *Une Adoration* who speak as one body (chapter two), one body here reflective of a chorus of women. The significance of Huston's nudity on-screen and on-paper is both reducible to her beauty and body, and that which exceeds it. In these scenarios, this universal and anonymous conditioning potential of the nude genre proves beneficial to Huston, enabling her to watch or write herself back without shame.

Such is not always the case, particularly for women working in the sex industry. We have only to think back to Arcan's *Folle*, in which the narrator recalls her first pornographic photoshoot as an adolescent, where her clothes and gestures are designed to mimic those of a child. The narrator and her boyfriend fail to retrieve these photographs on the internet years later, to the narrator's disappointment (wanting proof of her past, youthful beauty) and relief (knowing deep down that, had they been discovered, their relationship would have come to an abrupt end) (chapter one). The nude figure in these photographs is evidence of her past employment as a porn-star, problematising romantic relationships, and a bleak reminder of her disturbing initiation into the industry. As such, the photographs leave the narrator exposed, vulnerable, naked. The images fit the pornographic genre as opposed to that of the nude, and though she is stereotypically beautiful (thin, blonde and busty), partaking in an anonymous 'beauté du monde' of sorts, it is not freeing but incriminating, proof of her past employment as a whore (the 'bad' nude). Or put another way, if the genre of the nude is a universal, overarching term, it affects different women differently, clothing some and exposing others.

To Berger's theorisation of the nude, which depicts nakedness as a product of the observer, and which indicates the extent to which women have historically occupied the position of the looked-at nude within the artwork, and men that of looking subject outside of it, I would add that we must consider not just the possibility of a male nude as Berger suggests, but the possibility of the female nude herself as observer looking back at herself. Watching oneself back, like Huston during the aforementioned public screening, allows women to adopt the role of surveyor on two counts: in the way Berger apprehends it (as a woman looking at themselves as a man would, whilst often being observed by men too), and as a spectating subject outside of that limited role of woman-as-observed. Huston's

retrospective positioning thus falls beyond a male-orientated paradigm of viewership, grants her subjectivity and agency, and disrupts the male gaze privileged in visual imagery (chapter one). It is therefore possible to discern interesting nuances within Berger's gendered deconstruction of the nude genre when it comes to the pleasure of viewing: it is not always un-pleasurable to look back at oneself as abstracted object, but some may feel a little more naked than others (chapter three).

These differences, as discussed, arise in Huston's view from the arbitrary social distinction between low and high art, nude modelling and pornography. The aesthetic and social context and reception of these visual works unduly privileges one over the other. It is touching then that she should finish with the acknowledgment that she still poses, albeit 'autrement : en tant que romancière.' (59) She thus ends by reinforcing her affinity with other nudes, both palatable and abject (chapter two). Writing, for one thing, is performative and a figurative form of prostitution (contra Arcan's *Putain* which boasts a form of anti-prostitution, chapter four): one exposes one's body to the eyes of the reader. More overtly performative are the poses Huston adopted for several staged events, wearing men's clothes for 'Le Mâle entendu' whilst she performed a reading as a man,<sup>444</sup> and a headscarf for 'Belle comme une image' which she removed under the spotlight, deliberately illustrating her main message that all women are defined by their bodies, be they in burkas or bikinis, veiled or visually exposed (chapter two). Huston nonetheless professes to find nude portraits of herself as 'une inconnue, un rêve, un bout de beauté anonyme' (*Poser* 59) more interesting than these shots of her as a writer. It is out of respect and agreement with her point of view that I have hitherto focussed on the female nude, and that I will henceforward centre my attention on that of the male nude and other, invented bodies: those of her fictional characters.

### **Bouquets with a Difference**

Oberson's collection of red and black chalk drawings on white and grey paper are mostly composed of male nudes, which is ironic given the emphasis on the female nude's experience within Huston's narrative. If anything, his privileging of the male

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<sup>444</sup> See Eric Garault, *Edouard Ferlet, Jean-Philippe Viret, Nancy Huston et Fabrice Moreau, les protagonistes du 'Mâle entendu'*, 2013, 680 x 340.

nude alludes to its relative underrepresentation in art, and to the over-prevalence of female nudes in life drawing sessions and artists' studios.



### 7. D'Après Mapplethorpe 5 (22-23)

Many of his drawings defy gender categories altogether. Bodies blend together, melt into thin air or are stretched out like carcasses, topped with severed heads. Life meets death (chapter one), man meets woman, and the border between inside and outside, foreground and background blur, as the chalk's line thickly smudges into the paper beneath and around it. The spine and pages of the book add movement and texture to the sketched bodies, the middle crease deepening with use to forge furrows across the figures' limbs, and light playing differently on the bodies depending on where the book is viewed and how the pages are turned. The bodies thus take on new identities with every (re)reading. It is also interesting that the first and final drawings should be of the calla lily and tulips. In spite of its delicate appearance, the calla lily is poisonous,<sup>445</sup> and a tulip is associated with heaven on earth (Turkey) and the brevity of life (Netherlands).<sup>446</sup> The calla lily is also native to the Northern hemisphere,<sup>447</sup> whilst the tulip originates from the Middle East.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> 'Calla lily', in *Medline Plus: Trusted Health Information for You* <<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002864.html>> [accessed 29 March 2018]

<sup>446</sup> Michiel Roding and Hans Theunissen, *The Tulip: A Symbol of Two Nations* (Istanbul: Turco-Dutch Friendship Association, 1993), as cited in Maarten J. M. Christenhusz, with Rafaël Govaerts and others, 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips – Cultural History, Molecular Phylogenetics and Classification of Tulipa (Liliaceae)', *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society*, 172.3 (2013), 280-328 (pp. 289-295).

<sup>447</sup> 'Calla L., Sp., Pl.: 968 (1753).', in *World Checklist of Selected Plant Families*





**8. Callas dans jardin rouge (1); Tulipes (8); Sternum 1 (27); Callas (63)**

Oberson's selection thus symbolises strength in fragility (as with Huston's fictional character Barbe, as we will see), the divine within our earthly reality, the Orient meeting the Occident, and on a simpler note, red or black against white (incidentally, the tulip is drawn in black and white, and the calla lily in red and white). Opposites attract. In addition, both lilies and tulips contain male (stamens) and female (carpel) reproductive parts, a botanic emblem of bisexuality, and the drawings are also reminiscent of certain gender-neutral body parts. The first tulip is cleft in the middle as though between two legs, and small hand-like shapes emerge from the last, the human body peering through a floral curtain. Conversely, the human nudes resemble plants too, one head atop a torso as thin as a stem, and the chalk powdery like pollen. The bodies presented by Oberson are thus fluid and intertwined, overflowing the sexed scission which Huston considers endemic to life drawing.

Plants often rely, moreover, on other animals or natural elements to procreate and proliferate their seeds, in the same way that the nude's body requires an artist's intervention for the work of art to come to life. In the case of Huston and Oberson, I would say that the beauty of their love child (the 'troisième entité') is not to be found in independent artworks (such as her portraits on the front and back), but in the meeting of her written narrative and his art pieces. I would also suggest that its beauty is a discordant one. Huston focuses on the female nude 'qui pense' and 'qui a des yeux'; Oberson draws male or genderless nudes and shows us that men can be

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<[http://wcsp.science.kew.org/namedetail.do?name\\_id=30599](http://wcsp.science.kew.org/namedetail.do?name_id=30599)> [accessed 29 March 2018]

<sup>448</sup> 'tulip (n.)', in *Online Etymology Dictionary* <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/tulip>> [accessed 28 March 2018]

looked at too. Huston iterates the status quo, Oberson provides an alternative. This is commensurate to Anna Rocca's comments about Bourguignon's contributions to Arcan's *L'Enfant dans le miroir*, wherein 'l'illustration [...] s'inspire du texte seulement pour le dépasser'.<sup>449</sup> Rocca explains that illustration is no longer simply a matter of reproducing a story ('en lui donnant sens') but reflects 'un moyen de connaissance souvent plus riche et plus complet que le langage'.<sup>450</sup> Such is the case with *Poser nue*, where images surpass a supportive role, and with many scenes and messages contradicting rather than complementing the written text.

This is perhaps even truer for Oberson than it was for Bourguignon (whose works never stray too far from the originary text<sup>451</sup>), since it is unclear in *Poser nue* whether the images or text came first. If their creative strategy is anything like that for *Terrestres* (2014), as outlined in an interview for *Bibliothèque de Toulouse* where they take the stage together, then it is Oberson who initiates the process.<sup>452</sup> Either way, the pictorial and written bodies retain their respective autonomy within the shared space of this publication, communicating with one another but never acting as one. I would go as far to say that this is indicative of Huston's comments about couples who communicate in a language other than their mother tongue, as mentioned in *L'Empreinte de l'ange*. Something is always left off-limits to their lover (presumably because an intermediary language veils the nuances and memories proper to the mother tongue).<sup>453</sup> In this way, the multi-generic character of *Poser nue* reflects Huston's theorisation of love and gender: much can be gained from an interchange between art and literature, our mother tongue and another, between men and women (chapter two), but this should never be undertaken at the expense of difference. Much of the pleasure and beauty of difference (linguistic; generic;

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<sup>449</sup> Anna Rocca, 'Les Mots-images de Nelly Arcan et Pascale Bourguignon : L'Enfant et l'adulte au miroir', *Recherches féministes*, 27.1 (2014), 97-111 (p. 99).

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>452</sup> In the case of *Terrestres*, the images were initially presented in an exhibition, and it is Huston who responded to Oberson's images with a poetry collection (*Spire*). Nancy Huston and Guy Oberson, 'Rencontre d'auteurs : Nancy Huston et Guy Oberson', *Bibliothèque de Toulouse*, 22 December 2014.

See Nancy Huston, *Terrestres*, with artworks by Guy Oberson (Arles : Actes Sud, 2014).

<sup>453</sup> In Saffie's words: 'Lorsque deux amants ne disposent pour se parler que d'une langue à l'un et à l'autre étrangère, c'est... comment dire, c'est... ah non, si vous ne connaissez pas, je crains ne pas pouvoir vous l'expliquer.' Nancy Huston, *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1998), p. 230.

disciplinary; gendered) consists in keeping some secrets, even in the act of exposure, and in the production of a third entity that transcends dualisms: self-other, male-female, word-image, mind-body.

### *Instruments des ténèbres*

Huston's novel *Instruments des ténèbres* comprises two narratives, *Le Carnet scordatura* and *Sonate de la résurrection*. The first consists in the storyteller's dreams, thoughts and ideas during the writing of the second, *Sonate*, a story set in the eighteenth century about two twins (Barbe and Barnabé) orphaned and separated at birth, and whose lives lead down polarised paths. Barbe, born with a lucky 'coiffe',<sup>454</sup> leads a decidedly bleak life as far as it is narrated in this book (being rejected, abused and raped), and aside from losing his eyes midway through the novel, Barnabé leads an otherwise blessed and sheltered existence within the priory walls of Notre-Dame d'Orsan, surrounded by birdsong and the voice of his dead mother sent to protect him from a fearsome fate. All is revealed in the final pages: Barbe gives birth to a son and is sentenced to death for witchcraft, and she and Barnabé decide that he will appear before the hangman in her stead (the pair looking so alike) for the sake of her new-born child. Thanks to his sacrifice, she goes on to lead a (somewhat unrealistically) happy and fruitful life as a healer in Paris. By his death she is saved, hence the resurrection. I would add that the narrator Nad(i)a, whose own story is recounted in *Le Carnet*, is granted a new lease of life by the telling of Barbe's story. In the beginning, she introduces herself as Nada (nothing – her chosen pen name), but later tells her neighbour ““Je m'appelle Nadia”” (her birth-given name) (224), which is a few letters short of the Russian word for hope<sup>455</sup> (nadezhda). Nad(i)a and Barbe emerge on the other side of nihilism and death respectively, *Instruments* of light as well as darkness.

The motif of instruments and music is thus central to this novel. All three titles point to the importance of musical form in keeping with Huston's cross-

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<sup>454</sup> Being born with a caul, or *coiffe céphalique*, means the amniotic sac will not break but remain around the baby's head. This is extremely rare, affecting approximately one in 80,000 babies, and is a sign of good fortune in traditional folklore. Anisa Arsenaault, 'Shock, then Relief: Rare Caul Birth Takes Parents by Surprise', *The Bump*, 3 February 2018.

<sup>455</sup> André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris : Gallimard, 1928), p. 75.

disciplinary corpus, the novel a literary composition in more ways than one. Like all sonatas, the *Sonate* is compounded of several movements, and in keeping with the musical trick of *scordatura* – a deliberate mistuning to produce an unusual effect – Nad(i)a asserts in *Le Carnet* that, ‘Les gens avaient beau me frôler, me triturer et me tirer dans tous les sens, ils n’arrivaient jamais à faire sortir de moi le son qu’ils désiraient.’ (22) She refuses to be anyone’s muse or instrument, listening only to her creative alter-ego (what she calls her ‘*daimôn*’ [12]). This will be my first area of analysis, introducing *Le Carnet* and *Sonate*, the so-called ‘real’ and fictional bodies, and mapping Nad(i)a’s transition from nihilistic stasis to existential waking, her bodily investment in her notebook allowing her to engage with the world and people around her. From there, I will be able to outline how the material gives way to the immaterial in this work, immanence to transcendence, a heightened awareness of the body going hand in hand with an out of body experience. To finish, I will explore the cacophony of *instruments de ténèbres* which populate this text, from witches to saints, who prove to be so in tune with their bodies that they manage to transcend them, whose bodily wisdom is akin to spiritual guidance, and whose satanic songs bind them together across time and space.

### ***Scordatura* and Resurrection**

The key female protagonist and instrument, Nad(i)a, plays to her own tune. It is she who names things including herself (exchanging Nadia for Nada) (10), and who creates meaning (12), listening only to her inner demon (12). He guides her in *Le Carnet* through the writing of the *Sonate* (22), which is essentially one of birth and death, of *scordatura* and resurrection. It begins with the birth of Barbe and Barnabé and the death of their mother in childbirth (the twins hold each other so tightly that they cannot be detached from one another or their mother’s womb [16]), and ends with the birth of Barbe’s own son, her sentencing to death, and her miraculous survival through Barnabé’s sacrifice, offering to go to the gallows on her behalf (245). In the meantime, we also learn of the author Nad(i)a’s birth: her mother survives, but her twin brother is strangled in the womb (65). The telling of the *Sonate* thus allows Nad(i)a to fictionally envisage the death of her brother, her demon helping her to resurrect and kill him so that she may finally move beyond his memory. After all, *scordare* means to forget (22). This allows her to be reborn, a murderous *scordatura* allowing for the resurrection of the author; the *scordatura*

(that which is deliberately off-key) being the hanging of an innocent man. This is alluded to through the birth of Barbe's son. Upon seeing the afterbirth, she believes it may be a second child and that she may die in childbirth like her mother Marthe. To her relief, however, it is only 'la délivrance' (201). The double entendre gestures towards her own deliverance to come and, by extension, that of Nad(i)a. Thanks to Barnabé's death (the *scordatura*) and Barbe's resurrection Nad(i)a can finally come to terms with the death of her twin brother ('regarder sa mort en face') and, painful as it is, be herself again: 'Tantôt seule, tantôt avec d'autres, que ces autres soient réels ou imaginaires, vivants ou mort...' (248)

It also enables her to move beyond her nihilistic stasis reflected in the earlier half of the novel. At the beginning, Nad(i)a describes herself as 'me sentant dure, sans chair, sans cœur' (62), and traumatic events – newspaper headlines or beatings as a teenager – leave her 'ni chaud ni froid' (64 and 162). She further states that 'j'ai eu besoin de savoir que mon plaisir était stérile. Sans quoi, pas de plaisir' (11), a reminder of Huston's gendered division of nihilism and idealism in *Professeurs de désespoir* and *Carnets* (chapter two). Nad(i)a's aversion to the materiality of life and its reproduction constitutes a rejection of a feminine temporality. It is her father who instigates this existential numbness, after confining her sister Joanna to an asylum and cutting off her means (226). From then onwards, Nad(i)a sought out 'Nada. L'anéantissement. La page blanche.' (226) Her hatred of gardening on the first page is juxtaposed to a rhapsodic description of hydrangeas in bloom on the last, Nad(i)a blossoming throughout the story. Writing her *Carnet* and *Sonate* enables her to fill this blank sheet, bringing Nada back to Nadia again, providing her with 'cœur' and 'chair' (the demon's term of endearment for her, 'chère', a well-chosen homophone). The production of meaning ('sens') brings her back to her senses.

For one thing, writing is assimilated to sensual, sexual activity, Nad(i)a comparing the authorial invention and adoption of new identities to prostitution (104), and finding it hard to narrate Barbe's rape midway through the novel because 'Je n'ai pas encore la force de me mettre à l'intérieur de la personne qui fait cela.' (107) The creation of fictional personas is a visceral process, the trials and tribulations of the fictional characters being lived by the author herself, and the giving flesh to a narrative enabling her to feel her own again:

Ecrire ainsi – presque pareil à l'orgasme – cette impression que quelque chose vous quitte mais sans qu'il s'agisse de perte, de dépérissement – au

contraire : plus ça déborde, plus on se sent riche... [...] C'est un processus éminemment étrange, insaisissable. Le chaud et le froid extrêmes, en alternance. (161)

Nad(i)a's creative climax leaves her hot and cold at last.

This moment of *jouissance* entails the absolute submission of the author's body. In keeping with Berger's axiom cited in the epigraph, '*C'est la même vie*', Nad(i)a explains that Barnabé plays the same role in Barbe's life as that which she envisaged for her brother, her 'garçon moi' (103). He enacts the role of 'Témoin', watching over her as a second 'je' (103). Fittingly, she refers to him as Nathan, or 'Nothin' (103), the masculine version of Nada. Nathan is a perfect metaphor for the writing subject: a voice inside the writer's head. He adopts the figurative place of Nad(i)a's dead brother, she herself having very little power over the flow of her story. The music of her *Sonate* 'menace à chaque instant de s'arrêter' (183-184) and Nathan interrupts her theoretical musings in *Le Carnet* to move forward with the story: '*vos défenses intellectuelles mettent en danger la vie de vos personnages.*' (91) He interjects throughout with comments or queries cited in italics, like the omniscient voice of God in *Dolce agonia* (chapter three), to ensure the survival of her characters. Nad(i)a obeys because, deep down, she knows that she and her readers are moved more deeply by the story of Barbe and her child than those of real people (106 and 188). We need fictional friends ('l'humanité a besoin de vous tous, vous autres inexistants.' [91]) Ultimately, however, it is Nad(i)a who controls the narrative, and she claims the demon needs her more than she does him (225). She allows herself to indulge in personal memories in *Le Carnet*, ignoring the demon's 'bâillement' on the basis that her banal references to laundry and ironing 'ont tout à voir avec mon histoire' (144) (lest we forget: talking about the weather is just as important to the sculptor's practice in *Poser nue*). The lives and bodies of the real and fictional characters are mutually interdependent, and the banal and the epic go hand in hand (chapter three).

It is for this reason that Nad(i)a opts for a demonic rather than a divine muse, because she favours division over unity, *scordatura* over harmony. God is always one ('Même quand Il est Trois, Il est Un' [19]) whilst Satan 'est "l'Autre"', the devil with two horns and faces (19) to suit Nad(i)a of 'le cœur et le cerveau fendus' (20), the narrator with a resident demon, a second eye/I. Satan also makes for a more appropriate literary muse, being the prince of lies (90) and thus, fiction. I will now

explore the ways in which Nad(i)a's devilish narrative (her '*Trille du diable*' [101]) allows for the preservation and oscillation of bodily opposites: the corporeal and the spiritual, the material and immaterial, immanence and transcendence (it is worth remembering that Nad(i)a's demon and confidante is 'un homme sans corps' [12]).

### **Travel and Transformation: Quills, Goats and Sorcery**

The characterisation of Barbe and Barnabé is such that they seem to be ever on the edge of disappearing, Barbe existing on very little food, content with 'tout ce qu'elle voit et entend' (31), and Barnabé growing so thin 'qu'on voit pour ainsi dire à travers son corps' (236). The phrase 'à fleur de peau' (95) to describe Barbe when she escapes her hometown (being blamed for the death of her friend Jeanne [92]) is apt, since 'elle n'a plus confiance en sa propre existence, en sa séparation d'avec le reste du monde.' (96) It is also no coincidence that Barbe stares at corpses on the roadside as a child (31), or that she should be put in charge of cleaning carcasses when working as a servant (113). Barbe and Barnabé appear to exist on the cusp of life and death, presence and absence, finished off beautifully by Barnabé's death and Barbe's survival: their ultimate dis/appearing trick. These translucent protagonists are reflective of what fiction can achieve. In the words of Nad(i)a: 'On décolle. Ensemble on plane, flotte, glisse à travers une sorte d'affluence. Une substance non concrète, plus fragile qu'une toile d'araignée, plus impalpable que l'air. Un im/matériel.' (12) She celebrates irrationality, dreams, witchcraft, those fictions '[qui nous] permettent de voyager dans le temps et dans l'espace.' (122) Like 'les arabesques des hirondelles' which grace Barnabé's view before he loses his sight forever (134), writing provides a line of flight or dance.

Then again, Nad(i)a avows that fiction is 'rien d'aussi insipide que le cosmos [...] c'est un vol [...] en juste autant de temps qu'il en faut pour le dire.' (12) Nad(i)a's flight is not an infinite one. I understand this to mean that, though literature can transport us to other worlds, it is still informed by the writer's own being-in-the-world. When she speaks of witches for instance, flying up the chimney on broomsticks, she writes that 'il leur suffisait de se frotter le corps d'un onguent' and, mere lines before, Nad(i)a outlines the Socratic model of the soul according to Plutarch, concluding that 'l'âme ne sortait pas du corps' (21). The mode of aviation, be that broom or *plume*, is always firmly held in hand, the mind and body of the

writer acting as a point of departure for the soul's flight. This is best conveyed in the following passage:

Je dois travailler vite, plume volant sur la page, téléphone débranché, longue mèche de cheveux dans la bouche, lunettes me glissant sur le nez, genoux serrés, grande tension dans les épaules : de la con/centr/ation (tout convergeant vers le centre) – vite, vite, avant que la putréfaction ne s'installe. Les phrases doivent couler à travers moi sans me toucher. Mon contact les corrompt. Ce que dit, pense, fait mon *daimôn* est sublime, immaculé, d'une beauté surhumaine. Dès que moi j'interviens, le texte est souillé, vicié, rendu malade et banal... (18)

The writer is here bent over the writing-table, every fibre of her being taut and focused on the exercise at hand, yet the end-goal is to transcribe the demon's words with as little filtering as possible. The body is actively bent on its own annihilation, but is unalterably *there*.

This paradox is perhaps owing to the fact that the body is not conceived of in this novel in the same rigid way as Huston portrays it in her non-fiction (chapter two). The space between the surface of our body and the world around us is pliable, as is that between mind and body. This is clearly edified through Barbe's sensorial response to rape at the hands of a man named Donat:

elle se sent merveilleusement faible, oui, pour elle qui a toujours été raide et crispée c'est une faiblesse merveilleuse qui lui court à travers le corps comme une sève, portant le soulagement et la détente jusqu'aux extrémités de ses membres, elle détourne la tête mais sans fermer les yeux, de sorte qu'elle voit la chèvre plutôt que l'homme, la chèvre machouillant sa paille d'un air indifférent, Barbe sent en elle ce mouvement insensé et son propre cœur qui bat à faire éclater [...] Jésus, Jésus, Jésus, je suis en vie. (138-139)

As well as challenging a typical victim narrative (chapter three), with the rape victim here experiencing a form of pleasure and calm during the violent event, it is clear that Barbe's sexual experience is instigated not just by the rapist but by her natural surroundings, seeing the goat not the man, to whom it seems she is metaphysically connected. Her 'soulagement et la détente jusqu'aux extrémités de ses membres' extends to the goat, the imagery implying that it too shares in her new weakness and the serenity of the moment, 'machouillant sa paille d'un air indifférent'. This symbolises our animal instincts (*à la Reflets*, chapter two), emphasised by the term



'bête' to describe Barbe and Donat on the previous page (137), and the flexible relationship between our bodily experiences and those of others (*contra Reflets*). For one thing, Barbe recognises that her rape is owing to the death of Donat's lover and his subsequent brawl at the bar rather than any direct consequence of her own actions or appearance (136-137). Furthermore, the first signs of self-awareness which this rape initiates ('*Elle se sent*' [137]) impacts on her awareness of others ('davantage consciente de sa propre vie, elle l'est aussi, de celle des autres' [137]). There is no denying that the material meeting of Barbe and Donat's bodies serves as a catalyst for these metaphysical and interpersonal transformations: indeed, Barbe feels anger not pleasure during the third rape scene, because 'il a joui d'elle si vite qu'elle n'a eu le temps de rien sentir' (154), shoving her face into the mud. The body is always present during these encounters, but the sensual response which they produce is shaped by and shapes our relations with the spaces and people around us, at the time of the incidents and well beyond.

This bodily plasticity is stretched to new lengths in this novel thanks to the motif of witchcraft. Hélène Denis, who takes Barbe in at the beginning of the novel, cures the local townspeople of their ailments with secret concoctions (54-55 and 72), Barbe comes to heal people of broken hearts (249), and we hear of nuns in *Le Carnet* (Ursulines d'Auxonne) penetrated by the phallic batons of sorcerers (60-61). Barbe's survival is also nothing short of a miracle, as is that of her son whom she buries in a stable (244). The belief in magic and miracles – fiction, to put it simply – distends the potential of real bodies. Gail Weiss makes this point in her extensive study on body images, using the example of Power Rangers to illustrate the extent to which our illusions can push our bodies beyond what we might otherwise have been capable.<sup>456</sup> In emulating the gestures of superhuman beings, be that jumping in the air to scale ludicrously tall buildings or punching with all one's might to take on made-up monsters, humans can be surprised at their own strength. It is not without due cause, moreover, that the demon of *Le Carnet* hints at the true foundations of the *Sonate* ('*une tragédie, basée sur un fait divers authentique*' [247]). The story of Barbe at least is a true one, of a woman who was accused of witchcraft and sentenced to execution, escaping the noose when the case was reviewed in Paris, and

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<sup>456</sup> Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 74.

there was a series of exorcisms which took place amongst the Ursulines of Auxonne in the second half of the seventeenth-century.<sup>457</sup> The magical, miraculous bodies in this novel make the unbelievable (but real) believable since, as the narrative voice of *L'Espèce fabulatrice* declares, fiction is sometimes more so than real-life.<sup>458</sup>

### **A Woman's World**

Magic and witchcraft are significantly female practices in this novel. Magic formulas in the *Sonate* can only be passed on from mother to daughter, or grandmother to granddaughter (54), and whilst Barbe might have been left out of this biological, transgenerational process, she learns illicit remedies from Hélène. Nad(i)a also mentions the passing on of domestic duties in *Le Carnet* from mothers to daughters, such as ironing and mending socks (though she herself has done no such thing since leaving home) (144). This sharing of knowledge is an embodied one, Barbe learning recipes by heart, 'comme un poème' (157). Recipes and rules are learned line by line, forging a feminine rhythm that is transferred from woman to woman across generations, a collective, female, mnemonic song. This is reminiscent of women exchanging cookery ideas and jokes over the stove in *Dolce agonia* (many at Sean's expense)<sup>459</sup> and of Huston's gender theory, which considers women the natural mistresses of hearth and home because of their intuitive connection to life's more material elements (chapter two). This is not an obligatory or limiting mindset, however; women are not obliged to contribute or conform. Nad(i)a certainly does not, and Huston admits in *Lettres parisiennes* that she is able to enjoy cooking and cleaning precisely because she is not defined by these tasks absolutely, recognising her relative privilege (chapter three).

The theme of witchcraft also enables Huston to reflect the societal oppression of women via various labels, be that as whore, mother, or virgin; all witches one way or another. Let us start with the first. Witches' recipes in this novel include references to the body parts of a 'pute' and 'truie' (164-165), and when Barbe is locked up for witchcraft, she occupies the same cell as prostitutes and female thieves (215). They are all considered abject. The same is true of mothers, with Barbe being

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<sup>457</sup> See Benoît Garnot, *Le Diable au couvent : Les Possédées d'Auxonne (1658-1663)* (Paris : Imago, 1995).

<sup>458</sup> Nancy Huston, *L'Espèce fabulatrice* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>459</sup> Nancy Huston, *Dolce agonia* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2001), p. 43.

treated like the plague by other girls after giving birth (215) – her pregnancy all the proof the young men of the house need of her *putasserie* (213) – and ‘la fête de la purification’ acting as a reminder that ‘[si] t’es une femme, et [...] si tu fais un bébé t’es impure même si t’es la Vierge Marie en personne.’ (56) Not only is the mother-whore binary eroded, but so too is the Madonna-whore complex, the Madonna being the whore *par excellence* as the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Nuns are not spared either. The narrative voice informs us of nuns found with their uteruses broken in by batons covered in ‘prépuces de sorciers’ and ‘de langues et d’autres instruments d’infamie’ (61). This is linked to a popular fable, outlined by Nad(i)a:

une pièce d’or tombe de la bouche de l’héroïne à chaque mot qu’elle prononce, car elle a été bonne et généreuse avec les trois petits hommes de la forêt, alors que les paroles de sa belle-sœur vilaine et égoïste se transforment en crapauds. (61)

In Nad(i)a’s opinion, this boils down to the idea that : ‘Du ventre des vertueuses sortent des bébés ; de celui des méchantes jaillissent... des bâtons couverts de langues et de prépuces.’ (61) She also states that votive toads were given in thanks to the Virgin Mary for new-born babies, exclaiming that ‘la sorcière n’est pas loin...’ (61) The Madonna-whore complex central to Huston’s work (chapters one and two) is rendered far more complex in this novel. Nuns are sexualised, and the pure and virtuous, with gold coins flowing out of their mouths, join the side of the ugly sisters as soon as they give birth, as symbolised by the Virgin Mary who receives toads in their honour. This is reminiscent of Arcan’s differentiation between princesses and witches, and *schtroumpfettes* and *larves* in *Burqa de chair*, when she outlines women’s transformation from one to the other through puberty, sex and motherhood (chapter two), though in this case all mothers remain whores, witches.

This stigmatisation of women is owing to the different social perceptions of the male and female body, demonstrated by Barbe’s anxieties related to her first menses that coincide with her First Communion:

on lui explique maintenant que Jésus est mort par sa faute, que Son sang a coulé parce qu’elle a été méchante ; mais qu’en mangeant Son Corps et en buvant Son Sang elle peut se racheter; le sang qui coule entre ses cuisses est-il donc le bon ou la mauvais ? Celui qu’on n’aurait pas dû verser ou celui qu’il nous est loisible de boire ? (33)

These 'énigmes' go unanswered (Barbe having no female guardian to confide in at this point), indicative of the fact that women have notoriously been unable to discuss their biological processes in any public way. The blood of Jesus – symbolising the death of the flesh and the spirit's ascension – is heralded on a weekly basis, and the blood of women – symbolic of the birth of the flesh, *ad infinitum* – is reduced to silence. This comparison between the sacrosanct and the menstrual reminds us of the differences between how male and female bodies are perceived and received within the Western imaginary. The consumption of Jesus' blood allows for a purging of sins and accession to eternal life, whilst menstrual blood is a waste material which signifies women's potential to give birth: to repopulate the earth, not the heavens. When Barbe gives birth, moreover, she asks herself whether Mary herself suffered in the same way, and finds it noteworthy that such pain – comparable she suspects to Jesus's suffering on the cross – should go unmentioned (198). In this very dense passage, there is a staunch emphasis on this gendered division between the sublime (praiseworthy) and the abject (unspeakable) at the level of the body, with the male's blood and suffering glorified and that of women silenced. In addition, Jesus' crucifixion is associated with a transcendence of our worldly reality, whilst a woman's *délivrance* grounds us to our human condition. Nad(i)a proposes a new religion in which the body takes centre stage, no longer deferred or transcended, and thus deflects – as Acker views it – the patriarchal undermining of the body and, by extension, the feminine.<sup>460</sup>

This does not apply only to traditional maternal figures in this work. Donat's wife is infertile and Nad(i)a childless, describing how parents search for 'des signes d'envies' in her face, thinking:

Ce doit être dur d'être vieille fille, [...] sans doute n'est-elle pas trop moche encore mais, d'ici quelques années, les gosses du voisinage se mettront à chuchoter... La sorcière... t'as vu la sorcière ? [...] Tu l'as vue, qui nous épiait par la fenêtre ? (162)

This recalls Barbe's pregnancy when she stands at her window on a daily basis, rubbing her growing belly to the delight of the pig-feeder below, who is 'presque un enfant' (160). When Barbe scrubs Donat's wet shirts, moreover, she is reminded of 'lavandières' – women who administer abortions, and are eternally condemned to

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<sup>460</sup> Acker, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

scrub the bodies of dead babies on the roadside (154-155), a reminder of Barbe's childhood fascination with corpses in ditches and of her role as 'faiseuse d'ange' in adulthood (249). Women have more to share between the sheets than laundry tips.

Indeed, abortion is a central motif in this novel and one of the strongest bonds between female characters in *Le Carnet* and *Sonate*. After years of separation, Nad(i)a's mother visits her one day having guessed she was seeking an abortion (192). This quasi-telepathic mode of communication is similar to that of Barnabé and his mother Marthe who speaks to him beyond death (28) and Milo's in *Danse noire*, said never to have left him (chapter three), portraying supra-bodily bonds between mothers and their children. In this case, the rebirth of a mother-daughter connection stems from the death of a foetus. Similarly, the remnants of her mother's miscarriages inspire Nad(i)a to write: 'Je les ai rangés dans des bocaux de formol, ce sont mes *stigmata diaboli*, les parties anesthésiées de mon âme, là où le diable m'a touchée pour la première fois.' (47) These dead bodies, pickled and bottled in formaldehyde, are not an object of horror for Nad(i)a (like those of unbaptised babies for the peasants in *Sonate* [214]), but food for thought, feeding her literature. Abortion is thus another dualist symbol, substantiated by Nad(i)a's definition: 'obliger à se coucher ce qui se levait. De *ab* + *orri*. Pousser l'Orient vers l'Occident, l'Est vers l'Ouest, faire basculer les êtres par-dessus le bord du monde, dans l'autre monde... *Occire*. Mettre à mort.' (193) Like Oberson's flowers, abortion signifies a meeting of East and West, life cut short and superceded. In response to her mother's suspicions moreover, Nad(i)a responds with 'Oui, Mère', alluding to *the Mother*, the Virgin Mary, through capitalisation. The reference to the edge of the world, moreover, is a reminder that writing allows for a line of flight away from reality, a broomstick to fly off into the cosmos, like Barbe and Barnabé who seem ready to melt into thin air at any given moment.

Abortion, however, is not always experienced as a liberating process. Nad(i)a's partner Martin is unable to comprehend her grief (190 and 210), and 'faiseurs d'anges' (note the male gender) took her money and left her 'tremblante, suante, les nerfs en boule. Ruinée.' (190) This is similar to Ernaux's experiences at the hands of a female *faiseuse* and male surgeon (chapter two), and the exploitation of Nad(i)a's body for money is reminiscent of the narrator's pimps in *Folle* (chapter one). Many of the abortive measures Barbe undertakes also prove to be incredibly painful, reminding us that many women have died in the process (158-159). The

decriminalisation of *lavandières* in this work does not underplay the trauma involved in abortion, or the possibility of death with which women are still plagued. The narrative portrays abortion as a real grieving process too, albeit out of choice. Though Nad(i)a initially refers to her dead fetuses as beetles, she later speaks to one in the second-person as ‘Tom Pouce’ (theorising that this fictional character could have been symbolic of aborted fetuses in the pockets of peasants [223]). She continues to do so throughout the novel, conveying enduring attachment. I would likewise argue that the birth of Barbe’s son, his burial, and Barbe’s confidence in asserting that ‘j’ai gardé le bébé avec moi !’, is a means for Nad(i)a to work through her own loss of a child, like her mother losing Nathan. It indicates that he will remain with her, like Marthe with Barnabé. Barbe’s decision to keep her child, moreover, out of wedlock and despite her better judgement, answers to the following statement by Cixous: ‘Nous n’allons pas, si cela nous chante, nous refuser les délices d’une grossesse; toujours d’ailleurs dramatisée ou escamotée, ou maudite [...]’.<sup>461</sup> Barbe’s pregnancy is indeed a pleasurable one, against all the odds (159).

Witches stick together in spite of, or because of, their shared stigmatisation. The narrative pays homage to and incites them to action, like Barbe who ‘formentera une révolte, poussant les mendiants, les prostituées, les lépreuses, les syphilitiques et les folles à se soulever’ (250). This novel thus resists a pattern maintained throughout the history of literature, identified by Andrea King, whereby ‘la femme-sorcière qui voudrait parler’ is ‘réduite au silence par l’ordre masculin et brûlée vive’.<sup>462</sup> During her trial, Barbe refuses to respond to any questions, her silence incriminating her (220) just like Jesus faced with Pontius Pilate,<sup>463</sup> and Hélène compares her magic potions to a priest’s holy oils, saying that their different methods lead to the same outcomes (237). Nad(i)a’s religion is literature which, like holy oil or magic potions can heal, and which provides a collective space and means of liberation for rebellious women. Like M. Saint-Coeur who visits Barnabé at the end of the novel, and prefers ‘les femmes tombées, les mal mariées – celles qui avaient un peu vécu, quoi, dans ce bas monde’ (240), Huston has a penchant for fallen women. Women who, like herself, ‘fait partie de ce sous-ensemble de

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<sup>461</sup> Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>462</sup> Andrea King, ‘Nommer son mal : *Putain* de Nelly Arcan’, *Atlantis*, 31.1 (2006), 38-46 (p. 42).

<sup>463</sup> John 18. 28-38. *Holy Bible*.

l'humanité', counting prostitutes, nude models and generally *Bad Girls*. *Instruments des ténèbres* presents us with an extraordinary host of bad women who accomplish incredible feats, especially Barbe whose strength and survival through agricultural labour in the later stages of pregnancy is shocking given her alleged passivity (156), and who escapes death, outlives kings, and calls for a women's revolution.

### **Conclusion**

The body in *Poser nue* and *Instruments des ténèbres* is a mystical one, flying through space and time on easels, film-screens, notepads and brooms. This amounts to a form of escape and *jouissance* for muses, writers and readers. In *Poser nue*, muses' reveries help time go by more quickly, or let them literally run away with their thoughts. We are thus reminded that pretty faces have eyes too, muses *pose* for thought. In *Instruments* Nad(i)a's allows her inner demon to use her body as a writing implement; a route out of her nihilistic stasis. Her heroine Barbe, moreover, experiences sexual pleasure as an out of body experience. Art and sex thus allow individuals to fuse mind and body, and to undergo moments that are at once intimately embodied and dramatically disembodied. Bodies also prove to be extreme shape-shifters: taking the form of demons, soggy shirts, and pocketed and pickled thumbs, and melting into others or the landscape around them. The representation of female figures is less equivocal. They are all connected by their whoreishness, overstepping the Madonna-whore binary addressed throughout this thesis. In *Poser nue*, Huston indicates that models, porn-stars, prostitutes and herself as a writer are defined (to varying degrees) in accordance with the universal genre of the nude. In *Instruments*, no woman is spared the label of *putain*, even the Virgin Mary herself. Women implicate their daughters too (biological or not), passing down recipes in addition to information about sex and female bodily experiences, chiefly menstruation, childbirth and abortion. Their transgenerational knowledge is contagious, sustaining a lineage of whores: witches with lotions and potions, mothers with secrets and sauces; a coterie of laughing Medusas (chapter two). Women have the final say: *Poser nue*'s narrator recalls *Infrarouge*'s commanding photographer-heroine Rena, Barbe spreads her wisdom across Paris, and Nad(i)a ends on a stream of consciousness about hydrangeas. The message being, I like to think: long may the corporeal coven continue.

### 4.3 Arcan's *Arcanes*

At first sight, it seems Arcan's textual and corporeal bodies are very much open books. Arcan subjects her body to painful ordeals at the hands of clients, surgeons and her own (through anorexia; bulimia; extreme exercise; self-harm [chapters one and two]), and her autofictional novels and newspaper articles inspired by her life, lay bare her past to the reader. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that Arcan's statements often oppose one another, and her investment in cosmetic artifice masks rather than exposes the author's body. Even elementary details are concealed or convoluted, Arcan deploying two dates of birth (thirty-four and thirty-six at the time of death), and three names: her birthname Isabelle Fortier; her alias as an escort, Cynthia (her fictional dead sister's given name); and her *nom de plume* Nelly Arcan. Arcan maintained that this pseudonym helped her to 'créer un personnage capable d'endosser la brutalité, la haine, et le caractère sans issue de ce que j'écrivais.'<sup>464</sup> Her nominal mask, with typically Arcanian irony, allows her to express more about herself. Her veiling strategems grant her wider exposure. This section will focus on similar tensions in Arcan's media appearances and her writing, her visual and textual corpus. I will take stock of bodily representation in her interviews, newspaper columns and novels, with particular attention to reception, paratexts and posthumous publications. I will finish by postulating what this means for the body of the reader, looking to *Putain* (2001) in terms of readerly pleasure from a gendered and embodied perspective.

#### Interviews

Arcan first rose to public attention following the immediate and international success of *Putain* in 2001. Despite being published by Seuil and considered for the Prix Femina and Prix Médicis, Arcan's first novel received mixed critical reviews owing to the controversial nature of its content and autobiographical form, narrating the past experiences of a prostitute. This testimonial quality was commended and condemned depending on the audience, and Arcan similarly emphasised or downplayed the 'true' aspects of the narrative in different contexts. This was particularly evident in the direct aftermath of her initial literary success. In an

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<sup>464</sup> Nelly Arcan, *La Presse*, 2004 as cited in Fabien Loszach, 'Ambiguïté', in *nellyarcan.com* <<http://www.nellyarcan.com/pages/ambiguite.php>> [accessed 15 February 2018]



interview with Thierry Ardisson for France 2 (on the French version of *Tout le monde en parle*, not to be confused with the original Quebecois programme mentioned in previous chapters), Arcan responded to questions about *Putain* as though the narrative were entirely autobiographical.<sup>465</sup> Days later she outlined its fictional elements in an interview with Christiane Charette for Radio-Canada Télé, and for *Elle* magazine the following month, citing her parents, her employment as a barmaid and her investment in plastic surgery as the objects of invention.<sup>466</sup> Charette highlights the discrepancy between Arcan's two televised accounts, asking why Arcan should differentiate between the narrative voice and herself as author for a Canadian audience, and not for Parisian panellists: 'pourquoi [...] vous aviez accepté d'ouvrir le voile, puis ici vous le faites pas ?'<sup>467</sup> Charette proposes that the autobiographical element of *Putain* added to its concreteness, simplicity and intrigue, and made Arcan more approachable, saying 'j'veux vous adorer ici ce soir'.<sup>468</sup> As an explanation, Arcan voices her relative media inexperience, and explains that the distinction between fiction and reality is not always easily discernible. At best, reality and fiction differ not in kind but by degree. In her infamous and aforementioned interview for Quebec's *Tout le monde en parle*, for instance, Arcan admits to bending the truth in her newspaper articles, saying 'j'exagère tout l'temps', 'j'm'amuse dans mes chroniques' and that 'souvent j'raconte n'importe quoi'.<sup>469</sup> Arcan's media appearances thus complicate rather than clarify the already ambiguous autofictional character of her literary corpus.

This is emphasised by the way in which Arcan presents herself in terms of clothing, speech and pose, at times child-like, others professional, and in some instances provocatively sexualised.

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<sup>465</sup> Thierry Ardisson, 'Interview Up and Down de Nelly Arcan', *Tout le monde en parle*, France 2, 29 Septembre 2001.

<sup>466</sup> Christiane Charette, 'Nelly Arcan, auteure du livre *Putain*', *ICI Radio-Canada Télé*, 3 Octobre 2001.

Nelly Arcan, *Elle*, 27 September 2004, as cited in Loszach, *op. cit.*

<sup>467</sup> Charette, *op.cit.*

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>469</sup> Guy Lepage, *Tout le monde en parle*, ICI Radio-Canada Télé, 16 September 2007.



### 9. Nelly Arcan, auteure du livre *Putain*; Interview *Up and Down* de Nelly Arcan; *Baise Majesté*; *Tout le monde en parle*<sup>470</sup>

In Arcan's first televised interviews she presents herself in a somewhat demure fashion, with high necklines, minimal make-up and hair pulled back into a ballerina bun, conveying an innocence to suit her youth and newly established position as published author. This style, coupled with her childish smile, nervous laughter and sharp intakes of breath following difficult questions, offsets the crude material from *Putain* that Ardisson makes her read out loud (to be analysed shortly), and her tongue-in-cheek references to herself as 'l'unique', 'la schtroumpfette', and 'la reine' in her interview with Charette.<sup>471</sup> Those words which could potentially tarnish her public persona are modulated by her visual actions, setting her in a more favourable light as 'extrêmement intelligente, extrêmement compliquée, très analytique', in

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<sup>470</sup> Left to right: Charette, *op. cit.*;

Ardisson, *op. cit.*;

Francine Pelletier, 'Baise majesté', *Collection Cinématique QC*, Les Productions Virage, 11 December 2004.;

Lepage, *op. cit.*

<sup>471</sup> Ardisson, *op. cit.*

Charette, *op. cit.*

Charette's words.<sup>472</sup> Three years later in a documentary by Francine Pelletier entitled 'Baise majesté' her external profile is more equivocal.<sup>473</sup> The red light is emblematic of prostitution, her make-up is thicker, her lips sensually parted and the playful pigtails redolent of a darker innocence; that of the pseudo-child privileged in pornography (chapter one). Indeed, Arcan refers to herself as a *nymphette* and Lolita, saying 'j'suis devenue belle tout d'un coup à vingt ans [...] c'était gênant même pour les autres, tellement j'allais loin dans le déshabillage'.<sup>474</sup> She claims she constructed this persona to recreate the conditions of *l'enfant unique* that she was: 'pour retrouver cette petite princesse [...] pour recréer autour de moi l'enfance où j'étais le centre de l'attention', a statement difficult to read with any level of irony.<sup>475</sup> It is for similar reasons that Arcan received such criticism for her later appearance on *Tout le monde en parle* in Quebec (chapter two).<sup>476</sup> In this interview with Lepage she wears heavy eyeshadow and liner, and opts for a figure-hugging dress with an eye-catching *décolleté*, which quickly becomes the primary subject of conversation amongst the panellists. This is worsened by the camera panning and zooming which captures Arcan from top to bottom with revealing close-ups.<sup>477</sup> The way in which Arcan dresses and displays her body on-screen thus impacts directly on the way in which she and her texts are received, her *burqa de chair* affecting her *burqa de mots*.

The same is true for how much she reveals of herself through words. Arcan has been criticised for outlining her sexual preferences in interviews for *Summum* magazine and the incendiary television programme *Les Francs-tireurs*,<sup>478</sup> whilst insisting elsewhere that she be recognised for her writing instead, notably avoiding questions about her work as a prostitute with Charette to talk about *Putain*, saying 'moi qui étudie la littérature [...] quand je rent' dans un livre [...] c'est le texte que j'aime', the first clause reasserting her place in the literary landscape and her right to

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<sup>472</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

<sup>473</sup> Pelletier, *op. cit.*

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>476</sup> Lepage, *op. cit.*

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> Fabien Loszach, 'Nelly Arcan : L'Ambiguïté et la contradiction', *Le Devoir*, 16 September 2011. She also does for France 2 with Ardisson. Ardisson, *op. cit.*

write.<sup>479</sup> Both her *burqa de chair et de mots* in media appearances therefore reinforce the prostitute-writer dichotomy examined in her written corpus thus far in this thesis, with readers and viewers alike considering it a contradiction in terms.

This pattern notwithstanding, one must also take into account the context and audience of Arcan's media appearances when determining how her textual and corporeal body are received. In her interview with Ardisson for France 2, whilst one woman is present (actress Clotilde Courau), Arcan is surrounded by French panellists who constantly make fun of her Quebecois accent. Most notably, Ardisson asks her 'qu'est qu'il y a de moins sexy chez vous', walks across to her and whispers in her ear: 'il faut perdre cet accent canadien', much to the audience's enjoyment. Arcan's public shaming is elevated by Ardisson's tactical pause and 'moi je sais mais je dirai pas' patter beforehand so that the audience might think (in Ardisson's words) 'qu'est-ce que c'est, qu'est-ce que c'est' and thus become more strongly complicit in Arcan's denigration as colonial other (chapter three).<sup>480</sup> Even Arcan implores him to tell, adding to her public shaming once the secret is revealed. This imperialist reception of Arcan, on the other hand, grants her the immediate favour of her Quebecois compatriots when she appears on Canadian television four days later. Charette uses the same technique as Ardisson not to alienate Arcan, but to build an alliance. She purposely throws her a question that only Arcan will understand (the Ardisson interview not having aired yet) – 'qu'est-ce qu'il y a de moins sexy en vous' – preparing the ground for Arcan to retell the story, and refers to her accent as 'notre accent'. Arcan complies, repeating Ardisson's comments that 'c'était un accent qu'on utilisait plus depuis le dix-huitième siècle, qu'y avait des cours pour ça'.<sup>481</sup> This time, the audience's laughter is one of contestation, anger and support for Arcan as a fellow French-Canadian subjected to the mirth of the Parisian media elite.

The dynamic between Arcan and other women is also noteworthy.

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<sup>479</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

<sup>480</sup> Ardisson, *op. cit.*

<sup>481</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*



### 10. Interview Up and Down de Nelly Arcan<sup>482</sup>

On France 2, the only other woman present, Clotilde Courau, finds Arcan's work distasteful, symptomatic of a growing and (as Courau's facial expression implies) unnecessary trend amongst women writers to talk about their sex lives. Arcan's worldviews also sit uncomfortably with Courau's romantic notions, with Courau drawing attention to an absence of love in her interview answers. Furthermore, Courau shows complicity with the male panellists through her body language, sharing a wry smile and chuckle with Ardisson when Arcan speaks of her current lover, the love of her life sadly unable to accompany her for her Paris tour, and making jokes during the interview (the camaraderie shown in the above screenshot excludes more than it welcomes Arcan: jokes are evidently made at her expense).<sup>483</sup> Charette, on the other hand, adopts a motherly manner with Arcan, saying 'on est à genoux devant votre talent, ne vous inquiétez pas', and complimenting her on her looks and outlook to put her at ease.<sup>484</sup> In addition, Millet is among the audience, and the camera shifts towards her when Arcan compares their approaches to *jouissance* (which I will broach in due course). Millet remains silent in the shadows, before the camera pans back to Arcan. Arcan's narrative thus takes precedence with no interruptions permitted, and the leading (notably) female figure creates an open environment conducive to a fuller, richer response on Arcan's part (which perhaps explains her more nuanced distinction between her narrative voices and herself as author). Charette's maternal attitude towards Arcan also invites the viewers to perceive her as a likeable, innocent character. As such, the way in which Arcan's body and texts are received depends greatly on the gendered and national make-up of

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<sup>482</sup> Ardisson, *op. cit.*

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>484</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

the audience and panellists, as well as the discursive strategies employed by the interviewers. Arcan's agency over her body and text is therefore largely in peril when presented on television or the radio, because her comments and appearance are determined not just by how she chooses to exhibit them but by how they are received, deconstructed and reinvented by the people around her.

### Newspaper Columns and Novel Covers

As we know from 'La Honte' (chapter two), Arcan utilises essays to resist such misinterpretations of her work, and to divert attention away from her body towards her written word. It might be supposed, therefore, that newspapers would be a more forgiving medium for Arcan than television, with extra scope for writing. It is ironic, then, that Arcan's newspaper column 'Dehors, le Monde' for *La Presse* (2003-2004) should feature (very large) photographs of Arcan alongside each article.



### 11. L'Off Story; A Vélo dans le Red Light; La Cuisine du livre; Breast Yourself<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Nelly Arcan, 'L'Off Story', *La Presse*, 20-26 November 2003.;

One explanation lies in the thematic connections. In her astutely named article ‘*L’Off Story*’, a review of the Loft Story series, her glasses symbolise her satirical scrutiny of the producers, replacing them as Big Brother. As for ‘A Vélo dans le Red Light’, the paper held high above her head (a manifesto, perhaps) is indicative of her stand against the legalisation of prostitution on the (unfounded) grounds of hygiene, health and freedom. From this perspective, the photographs possess a supportive and mnemonic function, reinforcing the key messages within her articles with memorable illustrations. In ‘La Cuisine du livre’ the link is a little more tenuous, with a picture of Arcan representing her as author, in connection to an article about *Folle*’s inclusion in a book festival geared towards cooking. The image of Arcan next to ‘Breast Yourself’ however, in which she addresses the ever-topical notion of all-women meetings, seems entirely gratuitous. This last image seems to capitalise on her celebrity to render her article more appealing which, in turn, throws into question the intentions inherent behind the others.

The same is true of the covers selected for Arcan’s books, with Seuil opting for a characteristically bland cover page for *Putain* and the first edition of *Folle*, including subtle portraits of Arcan on the back pages and removable sleeves (featuring her infamous ‘regard bleu’<sup>486</sup>). For their 2005 edition of *Folle* however (as part of their Points collection), Seuil opted for photographs of Arcan in black and white burlesque attire specially selected by Arcan herself,<sup>487</sup> utilising her then already famous image as a selling-point. A 2002 edition of *Putain* also employed more provocative imagery.<sup>488</sup>

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Nelly Arcan, ‘A Vélo dans le Red Light’, *La Presse*, 2003-2004.;

Nelly Arcan, ‘La Cuisine du livre’, *La Presse*, 2003-2004.;

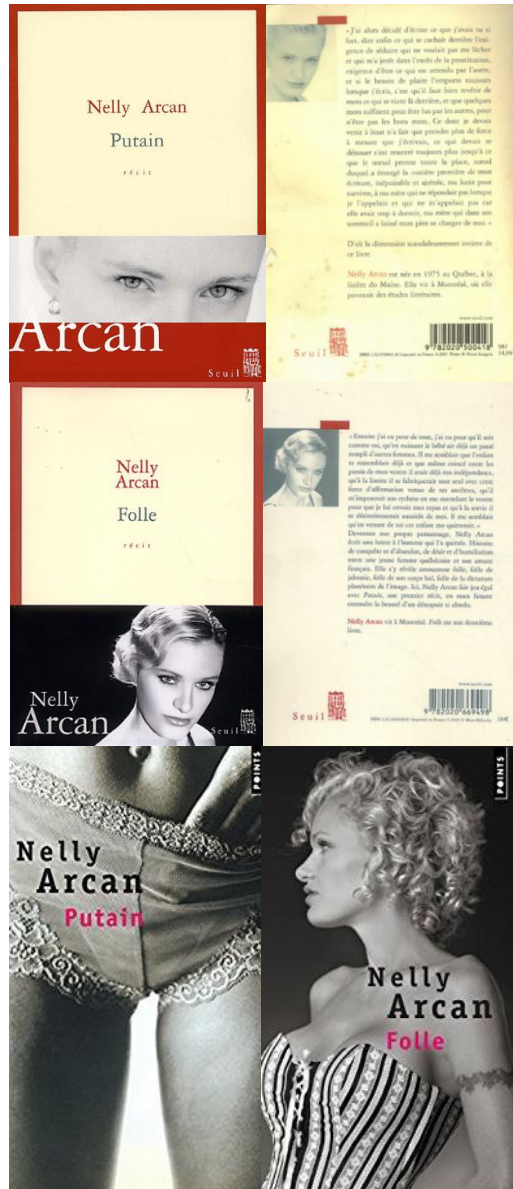
Nelly Arcan, ‘Breast Yourself’, *La Presse*, 16-22 December 2004.

<sup>486</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

<sup>487</sup> Photographer Marcelo Troche confirmed via email that a shoot took place in 2005, and that Arcan asked to use the photographs for her next book (or its later edition, as we can see from the 2005 cover of *Folle*). Marcelo Troche, ‘Questions sur la séance Arcan’, 28 December 2017. [Permission for publication granted]

<sup>488</sup> The same can be said of her texts in translation. See selection at *nellyarcan.com* <<http://www.nellyarcan.com/pages/arcanes.php>> [accessed 16 February 2018].





## 12. Putain; Folle; Points<sup>489</sup>

Such marketing strategies make it all the more difficult for readers and viewers to assess Arcan's texts in their own right; the authorial body encloses the text. This also prevents Arcan from escaping what she terms her 'corps emputassé'<sup>490</sup> since her image as well as her text becomes prostituted under a capitalist system, and the stylisation of many of the images themselves hark back to her previous profession, such as the clichéd schoolteacher look evident in *L'Off Story*.

<sup>489</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Putain* (Paris : Seuil, 2001), front and back covers.;  
Nelly Arcan, *Folle* (Paris : Seuil, 2004), front and back covers.;  
Nelly Arcan, *Putain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Paris : Seuil, 2002), front cover.;  
Nelly Arcan, *Folle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Paris : Seuil, 2005), front cover.

<sup>490</sup> Nelly Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, intro. by Nancy Huston (Paris : Seuil, 2011), p. 96.



More successful paratexts perhaps are not those intentionally incorporated by Arcan or her publishers, but advertisements added coincidentally (one presumes) by editors throughout magazine and newspaper issues. This occurs in Arcan’s column for the Montreal-based magazine *ici*, named ‘Accent Grave’ (a potential allusion to the Ardisson case) which ran from January 2007 until April 2009. There are no photographs of Arcan here aside from her portrait at the head of each entry, perhaps because her notoriety had been well and truly established by this point (substantiated by the title of her third and final column for *Le Journal de Québec*, ‘Chronique de Nelly Arcan : Ça vaut le détour’).



13. Pisser dans tous les coins; Bob est snob; Faire la Job; Sarkozy et viagra<sup>491</sup>

<sup>491</sup> Nelly Arcan, ‘Pisser dans tous les coins’, *ici*, 14-20 February 2008.;  
 Nelly Arcan, ‘Bob est snob’, *ici*, 5-11 February 2009.;  
 Nelly Arcan, ‘Faire la job’, *ici*, 18-24 January 2007.;  
 Nelly Arcan, ‘Sarkozy et viagra’, *ici*, 10-16 May 2007.

Arcan's *chroniques* for *ici* are composed of critical reviews of books, films, television series, news stories or miscellaneous cultural phenomena, ranging from IKEA to Saddam Hussain's execution and inclusive of short stories, through which Arcan offers a critical appraisal of modern-day society. Many of the themes and motifs recurrent in her posthumous publication *Paradis clef en main* are already apparent here as she nears the end of her life, such as astrology, smoking and suicide (reasserted in her article 'Se Tuer peut nuire à la santé' for P45 magazine,<sup>492</sup> republished posthumously in *Burqa de chair*). Unsurprisingly, Arcan frequently returns to the topic of sex and the body in these articles, those preoccupations central to her entire corpus. She addresses prostitution (key to *Putain*; 'Petit papa Noël'<sup>493</sup>), feminine beauty (*Peggy*;<sup>494</sup> *A Ciel ouvert*; *Burqa de chair*), pornography, love (*Folle*), ageing and plastic surgery ('La Ride'<sup>495</sup>; *A Ciel ouvert*). The advertisements for sex shops, beauty services, massage parlours and lingerie companies that are printed alongside Arcan's articles, on a near-weekly basis, echo Arcan's corporeal preoccupations (about the body within her corpus), highlighting the extent to which women are reduced to their bodies within contemporary society, and seeming almost deliberate. Even in those rare instances where her articles do not centre on the topic of sex or the body, such as 'Pisser dans tous les coins' (a CD review) or 'Bob est snob' (a reflection on snobbery), the advertisements do. This omnipresent sexual imagery illustrates Arcan's sexual and bodily reflections and justifies their occasionally erroneous reoccurrence within her work (as with 'Sarkozy et Viagra', where the sexual tone does not add anything of weight to her argument).

On a more progressive note, there are also adverts for theatre productions about women and their bodies with titles that point to social critiques of the heteronormative male gaze (including *200 Epreuves* advertised alongside 'Sarkozy et Viagra'). This indicates that women's sexualisation and bodily objectification are both rife in society, and at the forefront of regional consciousness. Advertisements circulated in *ici* thus act as evidence for Arcan's social critiques within her *chroniques* (and her corpus in a general sense given the thematic parallels between

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<sup>492</sup> Nelly Arcan, 'Se Tuer peut nuire à la santé', *P45*, 5 March 2004.

<sup>493</sup> Arcan, 'Petit papa Noël'.

<sup>494</sup> See Nelly Arcan, *Peggy*, intro. by Martine Delvaux (Montréal : La Mèche, 2016).

<sup>495</sup> See Nelly Arcan, 'La Ride', *Moebius : Ecritures/Littérature*, 99 (2003), 9-16.

her newspaper reviews, short stories and novels). They situate her personal position within a collective feminist project, adding credence to her unerring anxiety with regards to sex, the body and the feminine condition.

The spatial positioning of the advertisements also supports this view, being pasted into the margins of Arcan's column. In 'Baise majesté', Arcan asserts that we must learn not from history, but from those who are marginalised in our modern-day society, because they represent the future norm.<sup>496</sup> In short, contemporary abject figures such as prostitutes, porn-stars and plastic surgery fanatics like Rose in *A Ciel ouvert* (chapter one) are, according to Arcan, the models to which all women will one day conform. These marginal figures are marginalised in a literal sense in Arcan's *ici* columns, their paratextual position emulating their social status, and the regularity with which they sit astride Arcan's texts indicating the increasing banality of women's objectification. In short, the incidental paratexts in her *ici* column corroborate Arcan's fatalistic view of the feminine condition. And yet, they are also granted visibility and a proportional space within the editorial, and Arcan's narrative threads complement the images making for an empowering message. The photographs of Arcan alongside articles for *La Presse* do so more obviously. If paratextual marginalia in the media is ordinarily composed of objectified female figures, the deliberate intervention of Arcan's body within her column concurrently reflects standard editorial practice (herself the objectified female figure) and disturbs its usual power principles. Arcan takes charge of the paratext, and thereby ensures agency in terms of how she and her texts are represented. Like Rose in *A Ciel ouvert* (chapter one), Arcan cannot escape objectification altogether (if Arcan does not figure in the paratext other women will, *ici*'s marketing shows). Her best hope is to adhere to it on her own terms, to regain some control. In so doing, she also demarcates a space for herself as *l'unique* in her column (a real-life reconstitution of 'la Femme', 'la Totale'), claiming every part of the visual and textual space.

How useful this is for a feminist cause is, of course, debatable, if she contributes to the universal objectification of women. Indeed, the fact that she does so of her own volition implies conscious collusion with the patriarchal media systems of her time. It indicates the extent to which she capitalises on the saleability of her body, or allows it to be, benefitting the male-dominated publishing and

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<sup>496</sup> Pelletier, *op. cit.*

editorial houses. It certainly does nothing to detract from criticism regarding her auto-objectification as a writer, particularly one aiming to be considered a philosopher rather than a prostitute (chapter two). Ultimately, however, acquiescing to and actively governing such strategies ends in the increased sales and readability of her books, as Charette intimated during their conversation ('ça donnait vraiment envie d'le lire'<sup>497</sup>). Once Arcan's readers purchase and read her books, they are faced with a critique of similarly patriarchal and misogynist systems. This ironic (and potentially counter-productive) marketing tactic also enables Arcan to secure her desired target audience. In her interview with Ardisson, she says she wants her clients above all others to read her work, to reflect on the practice of prostitution, and the respective roles of prostitutes and their clients.<sup>498</sup> It is ironic, then, that Seuil should have chosen such a sober jacket for *Putain's* original release. By selecting a photograph of herself in a corset for the cover of *Folle* Arcan is more likely to attract her desired consumer, a client of the sex industry. Arcan thus markets her physical body so that her textual body bears its intended fruits in the hands of an intended readership.

### **The Body Exhumed**

What happens, then, when the actual authorial body vanishes? When Arcan dies in 2009? How far do Arcan's marketing and narrative strategies operate in the same way before and after her suicide, and how does her death inform the ways in which her physical and textual body are read, received and potentially reinvented by her audience? On the one hand, Arcan's corpus received much public attention after her death as a result of her controversial suicide ('Se Tuer peut nuire à la santé' indicates that high suicide rates are, in part, the result of inadequate social care), with numerous articles and radio programmes covering the incident and running retrospectives of her corpus in the aftermath, and with an eponymous film recently released by Anne Emond (2016).<sup>499</sup> Her work had already become the subject of much scholarly debate, and now features on many academic syllabuses, literary and philosophical. Too often spoken of in terms of her physical attributes during her

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<sup>497</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

<sup>498</sup> Ardisson, *op. cit.*

<sup>499</sup> *Nelly Arcan*, dir. by Anne Emond (Cactus Films, 2016)

lifetime, her foremost status as writer is firmly cemented after her death.<sup>500</sup> Her *burqa de chair* is replaced with a *burqa de mots* that outlives her flesh (one way or another, there is no way out of the burqa for women [chapter one]). It is no coincidence, for one, that Arcan submitted her manuscript for *Paradis clef en main* to Coups de tête a few days before her suicide.

It is also my belief that the whore-writer dichotomy within her textual and visual representations (perhaps best displayed in her *La Presse* column) constitutes one of the primary reasons for the continuing and increasing posthumous success of her literary body. Gleize deduces that Arcan achieves a ‘résurrection célinienne du “devenir soi-même”’ in *Folle*.<sup>501</sup> I would say, on the flip-side, that she is continuously resurrected by critics because her ‘soi-même’ remains a point of conjecture, ever in a state of ‘devenir’. For one thing, much of the literary criticism about her work centres on this binary considering it one of her defining authorial qualities, and essential to her portrayal of sex, the body and the feminine condition, aptly personifying the Madonna-whore complex (chapter one). Arcan did little to tamper with this ambiguous image of herself; if anything, she encouraged it. The day before she died, she posted an image of a doll splayed out on the ground (chapter one), alluding to her own impending death and choosing to self-identify in her final hours as a living Barbie.

Arcan thus carefully archives her own remains before committing suicide, engineering her legacy. Even her chosen name Arcan signifies the figure of death, the thirteenth of the *Tarot de Marseille*, or a spiritual journey, indicative of her prolonged fascination with death and the afterlife from the outset of her literary career. Cynthia in *Putain*, moreover, would choose the name Morgane were she to have a daughter; ‘histoire de conjuguer morgue et organe’ Michel Peterson remarks.<sup>502</sup> Some of Arcan’s works also read as suicide notes, *Folle* being a letter to her boyfriend (chapter one) and *Paradis clef en main* arguably a letter to its readers, since she sent it to her publishers merely days before hanging herself. These texts

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<sup>500</sup> Lori Saint-Martin, ‘La Rencontre des extrêmes’, *Voix et images*, 37.2 (2012), 158-161 (p. 161).

<sup>501</sup> Mélanie Gleize, ‘Reine/*Folle* de Nelly Arcan, Seuil 205 p.’, *Spirale*, 204 (2015), 56-57 (p. 56).

<sup>502</sup> Michel Peterson, ‘Nelly me tangere’, *Revue santé mentale au Québec*, 21.2 (2012), 127-142 (p. 140).

thus act as figurative shrouds, or a fabric to borrow Barthes' imagery from 'La Mort de l'auteur'. As he puts it, 'le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture.'<sup>503</sup> In Arcan's corpus though, the textual tissue is designed to reflect the author's views foremost, and so that the author may not be forgotten. In other words, her textual tissue is woven in such a way that 'La Mort de l'auteur' cannot take place. In *Folle, Paradis clef en main* and 'Se Tuer peut nuire à la santé' moreover, Arcan outlines her fatalistic worldview (chapter one), her predisposition to suicidal thoughts (chapter three), and a critical commentary on suicide, based on the Canadian government's response to a rise in deaths from the Jacques-Cartier bridge.<sup>504</sup> In reaction to a decision to put up more barriers, Arcan suggests that suicidal individuals will simply find somewhere else to jump from, and that we all need to take responsibility for their deaths, bearing in mind that 'les barrières les plus solides contre la détresse des gens qui nous sont chers, c'est encore vous et moi.'<sup>505</sup> Through her various texts, Arcan thus narrates her past existential pain and carves out ways to be remembered in the future, ways that entail the recognition of new literary works – her posthumous textual body – and a renewed emphasis on the physical body of the author, this time as sexual and spectral figure (chapter one).

Admirers and archivists of Arcan's work after her death have endeavoured to preserve these pre-suicidal reflections of Arcan's and this ambiguity created by a whore-writer dichotomy. This is aptly epitomised by the objectives of the research and design team behind *nellyarcan.com* (a comprehensive online guide to Arcan's corpus), outlined as follows by the lead writer Fabien Loszach:

Le rôle d'un site ce n'est certainement pas de faire le tri dans ces images et ces représentations, de séparer de façon univoque et définitive le vrai du faux, mais bien de favoriser, avec le recul nécessaire, des interprétations multiples et sans complaisance.<sup>506</sup>

The multiple personas which Arcan presents to us during her lifetime thus live on after her death, critics advising against monolithic readings of her work. Léonore

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<sup>503</sup> Roland Barthes, 'La Mort de l'auteur', in *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris : Seuil, 1984 [1967]), pp. 61-67 (p. 65).

<sup>504</sup> Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, p. 163.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>506</sup> Fabien Loszach, 'Intentions', in *nellyarcan.com* <<http://www.nellyarcan.com/pages/intentions.php>> [accessed 16 February 2018]

Brassard notes that Emond's film followed in this vein, presenting viewers with four personalities, and that reactions testified to a deep-rooted and protective love for Arcan, of the 'touche-pas-à-ma-Nelly' type.<sup>507</sup> This is in keeping with Arcan's fluid and nuanced textual and bodily representations, and shows that the steps taken by her prior to her death ensured a polymorphous reception. It is also interesting to note the choice of texts selected for *Burqa de chair*, published posthumously. This collection of essays comments on women's sexual identity and development, women's objectification, the oedipal triangle, shame, the whore-writer dichotomy and suicide. There is little reference to prostitution and pornography, aside from references made by Huston in her introduction (chapter two) which enables this collection to act as a reflection of Arcan's later critical approach. For one thing, the title – *Burqa de chair* – is taken from Arcan's novel *A Ciel ouvert* published just two years before. Most notably, it includes her essay 'La Honte' in which she defends herself against and condemns the comments made by the panellists on *Tout le monde en parle* (Quebec), a way for the editors to reiterate the dangers of misinterpreting her work.

Then again, neither of her bodies – textual or corporeal – is immune to manipulation. The writers of her biography *Nelly Arcan : De l'autre côté du miroir* (2011) were reproached by Arcan's family lawyer for misrepresenting or falsifying certain parts of her story (especially the existence of Cynthia, her unborn sister)<sup>508</sup> and Huston has been reprimanded by literary critics for misinterpreting Arcan's work in 'Arcan, Philosophe' in an attempt to reinforce her own biologically determinist views (chapter two).<sup>509</sup> The fact that Huston's chapter introduced Arcan's *Burqa de chair*, touching her textual body, makes Huston's interpretive interference all the more transgressive. Following her death, Arcan's work is thus policed by those who knew and loved her. The outcome of Arcan's death on how she is perceived and presented is paradoxical: on the one hand, Arcan's premature death

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<sup>507</sup> Léonore Brassard, 'L'(In)cohérence identitaire. Nelly Arcan, Kathy Acker', *Sens public* (2017), 1-13 (p. 4).

<sup>508</sup> Mélanie Marquis, 'Biographie de Nelly Arcan : "Amateurisme" et propos "mensongers" ?', *La Presse*, 11 October 2011.

See Marguerite Paulin and Marie Desjardins, *Nelly Arcan : De l'autre côté du miroir* (Mariville : LER, 2011).

<sup>509</sup> Saint-Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

Karine Rosso, 'Nelly Arcan et Nancy Huston en dialogue?', in *Nelly Arcan : Trajectoires fulgurantes*, ed. by Isabelle Boisclair and others (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2017), pp. 63-86 (p. 64).

leaves her defenceless in the face of misinterpretations and criticisms, on the other, her defencelessness means that monolithic or loaded readings of this kind are treated with increased suspicion. Her literature adopts a quasi-sacred character following her death, principally because of her age, only three years older than Jesus at the time of his death (or one if we humour her tweaked identity). Her *corps* and corpus become literal *arcanes*, shrouded in mystery and rendering Arcan untouchable. Even if one were to risk disturbing the Arcanian aura, the often-contradictory fragments which make up Arcan's corpus, her multiple public portraits, and her insistence on fuelling the whore-writer dichotomy, make it impossible to build a single story out of her body or texts.

Brassard speaks of a 'surcohérence' in Arcan's *Putain* with the narrative voice complying with stereotypes of gendered behaviour that she herself denounces (chapter two). This leads to an '(in)cohérence identitaire' because the narrative becomes '*trop cohérent avec lui-même pour l'être en définitive*'.<sup>510</sup> She concludes that Arcan finds herself trapped in her own discourse: by conforming to the structures she says to uphold society (her narrative and persona remaining coherent), she leaves herself no solutions or escape routes away from them<sup>511</sup> (it is therefore troubling to see *Paradis, clef en main* translated to *Exit* in English, implying that suicide is the only way out). If hyper-conformity can be counter-discursive however (chapter one), I would similarly argue that Arcan's 'surcohérence' is powerful in its *incoherence*, not just in *Putain* but across her corpus and through to the public arena. Her *arcanes* can never, finally, be defined. Furthermore, where Baillargeon considers Arcan 'prisonnière' of 'son pari dangereux' ('jouant sur la contradiction entre ce qu'elle écrit et son image de vamp'), who 's'est fait prendre à son propre piège', I believe she ends up the winner of her game, making up for her losses later down the line.<sup>512</sup>

### **Arcan's Novelistic Style in *Putain***

The real Nelly is thus off-limits to the reader or, indeed, the real Nelly does not exist; we cannot speak of her as one person. The omniscient narrative voice in Arcan's

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<sup>510</sup> Brassard, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>512</sup> Mercédès Baillargeon, 'Médias, hypersexualisation, et mise en scène de soi : Le Pari dangereux de Nelly Arcan', *Québec Studies*, 63 (2017), 9-28 (pp. 10, 18 and 27).



novelistic prose is equally difficult to access in *Putain*, not because it is multi-faceted but quite the opposite: because we are provided with such a strong, singular story. This is evident in the following extract:

Oui, la vie m'a traversée, je n'ai pas rêvé, ces hommes, des milliers, dans mon lit, dans ma bouche, je n'ai rien inventé de leur sperme sur moi, sur ma figure, dans mes yeux, j'ai tout vu et ça continue encore, tous les jours ou presque, des bouts d'homme, leur queue seulement, des bouts de queue qui s'émeuvent pour je ne sais quoi car ce n'est pas de moi qu'ils bandent, ça n'a jamais été de moi, c'est de ma putasserie, du fait que je suis là pour ça, les sucer, les sucer encore, ces queues qui s'enfilent les unes aux autres comme si j'allais les vider sans retour [...].<sup>513</sup>

Arcan was asked to read this passage out during her appearance on *Tout le monde en parle* with Ardisson,<sup>514</sup> presumably because it so aptly reflects the shocking narrative style and content of this work. The other female panellist Courau is quick to show her disapprobation, saying she 'je sais pas si j'ai envie de lire ça'.<sup>515</sup>

Why, indeed, should or would we read her works? Arcan was quick to defend herself, saying that 'mais vous êtes pas obligée de le lire y'a d'autres gens qui l'lisent et qui aiment'.<sup>516</sup> It seems to me, though, that much of the power of this text derives precisely from the displeasure procured by her narrative style and content. Firstly, the semantic field of sexual imagery and excessive focalisation emphasises the very real quality of this experience. This is juxtaposed to pornography in which the fantastical element of the scene renders it pleasurable for the viewer (chapter one). The overly realistic language deployed by Arcan paves the way for nausea more than arousal (granted every reader will respond differently). Secondly, the unending stream of consciousness and visceral, immersive language, prevents the reader from pausing and overloads the senses. Arcan thus couples intensive focalisation with an uninterrupted syntactical structure to recreate her experiences of prostitution, where the sheer succession of male clients leads to rage<sup>517</sup> and exhaustion.<sup>518</sup> The

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<sup>513</sup> Arcan, *Putain* (2001), p. 19.

<sup>514</sup> Ardisson, *op. cit.*

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> Pelletier, *op. cit.*

displeasure we experience is Arcan's own, the reader seeing the scene through Arcan's eyes (chapters two and three). In this way, the reader is touched, or indeed contaminated by the figure of the abject (chapter two), whilst Arcan is left relatively in-tact by the tactile, readerly encounter. Thirdly, the narrative style is out of keeping with Barthes' requirements for the *plaisir du texte* being tied to the cultural, classical, popular, secure; a safe haven entailing an 'Extraordinaire renforcement du moi (par le fantasme).'<sup>519</sup> The pleasure of the text according to Barthes comes from a reinforcing of one's values and a fantastical retelling of the familiar (familial and social). It is a comfortable mode of reading.<sup>520</sup> Arcan's unorthodox style however – with a prolonged stream of consciousness, auto-fictional form and highly focalised imagery – makes the reader conscious of the narrative strategies in play because they are out of kilter with traditional genres, being neither pornographic nor erotic,<sup>521</sup> nor fictional or theoretical. In short, Arcan's hyper-sexual text is unsettling and profoundly unpleasurable, closer instead to *jouissance* as Barthes understood it: '[ce] qui met en état de perte [...] qui déconforte' and which constitutes 'la perte abrupte de la socialité'.<sup>522</sup>

By seeing the world through Arcan's eyes, moreover, the reader and writer become fused, another of *jouissance*'s defining features for Barthes.<sup>523</sup> Unlike Millet's work however, there is little room for *jouissance* in a sexual sense, as Arcan points out in her interview with Charette.<sup>524</sup> The extensive stream of consciousness and lack of punctuation make any climax impossible. The reader is not given the satisfaction of an ending, meaning that the ultimate point of *jouissance* in that sense never takes place. In figuratively frustrating the reader in this way, Arcan succeeds in demonstrating what she asserts in her interview for *Les Francs-tireurs*, that desire

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<sup>519</sup> Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>521</sup> As Baillargeon puts it: 'Loin de la littérature érotique, *Putain* représente plutôt l'ambivalence douloureuse d'une prostituée, déchirée entre son désir d'émancipation et son insécurité, qui passe par un désir de validation à travers le regard masculin.'  
Baillargeon, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23 and 54.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>524</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

is not a constant.<sup>525</sup> Arcan asserts for the documentary ‘Baise majesté’ that prostitution paints ‘le fantasme de la femme qui est toujours en train d’jouir, comme pure orifice qui est toujours comme prête à recevoir les hommes, et qui est toujours dans le plaisir, [...] comme une sorte de jouissance perpétuelle’, whilst her endless paid sexual encounters with men in actual fact left her disgusted by the male sex.<sup>526</sup> Arcan’s novelistic prose thus corroborates her personal, theoretical views, and goes against the ideals of a *pornotopia* ‘where it is always time for sex’.<sup>527</sup>

*Jouissance* can only be arrived at in this novel via nausea, and there is certainly no room for Ernaux’s conciliatory transformation (Ernaux’s corpus review that connects the dots between previous works, allowing for a pleasurable sense of inclusion and closure on the part of the reader). Aude Gwendoline states that the only form of *jouissance* apparent in *Paradis, clef en main* lies in vomiting whilst pleasure can be found in ‘la ré-ingestion du texte vomi’.<sup>528</sup> In *Putain*, the reader is incited to a similar state of nausea through the visceral and unpunctuated language, Arcan making us digest the words which she expels and relive her cathartic moment. Sexual representation in *Putain* thus drives not to an orgasmic conclusion, but to a nauseating experience.

Unlike the characters in Millet’s work again moreover, Arcan tells Charette that she is anything but submissive in her works (chapter one),<sup>529</sup> in contrast to her past experiences as a prostitute. Whilst the autobiographical tone of Arcan’s novels implies a form of literary prostitution (selling one’s narrative body, and one’s image too if we take her aforementioned paratexts into consideration), the gendered power dynamics in Arcan’s work invert traditional structures at work in prostitution

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<sup>525</sup> Richard Martineau, ‘Entrevue avec Nelly Arcan (intégral)’, *Les Franc-tireurs*, Zone 3 Canada Québec, 26 January 2005.

<sup>526</sup> Pelletier, *op. cit.*

<sup>527</sup> Linda Williams, ‘Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust’, in *Porn Studies*, ed. by Linda Williams (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), pp. 271-308 (p. 300).

<sup>528</sup> Aude A. Gwendoline, ‘La Dialectique du dehors et du dedans appliquée à la traduction entre les genres : *Paradis, clef en main* de Nelly Arcan/*Exit* de David Scott Hamilton’, *Diacronia*, 24 (2015), 121-132 (p. 121).

See Nelly Arcan, *Paradis, clef en main* (Montréal : Coups de Tête, 2009), pp. 13 and 70. for examples of vomiting as a moment of *jouissance*, and of links between vomiting, eating and words. Antoinette speaks aloud and the words are then projected back to her on a screen above her bed, producing a repetitive cycle whereby she endlessly throws up and regurgitates her words.

<sup>529</sup> Charette, *op. cit.*

(chapter one) (contrary to her own claims in *Burqa de chair*).<sup>530</sup> In prostitution, it seems Arcan has little control over her body, refusing only that men kiss her on the lips (if the cliché outlined in ‘Petit papa Noël’ is to be believed).<sup>531</sup> In her novels however, Arcan’s body is safeguarded, Arcan using her textual body to displease and touch the reader instead. The corporeal imagery employed by Arcan also enables her to position herself as *l’unique*, and to dehumanise men (as she claims to be in prostitution [chapter one]). In this passage, the male figures are reduced to anatomical parts, deconstructed and anonymised – mere fragments of ‘la masse’ (‘des bouts d’homme’, ‘des bouts de queue’) – and only Arcan retains a clear subject-status as narrative voice and author. As Arcan explains, she wishes not to avenge herself on any man in particular, but to reflect the sense of nausea instilled by countless men. In short, Arcan’s text is not intended to gratify the reader, as she did her clients as a prostitute, but to forge a compelling and distinctly social critique of prostitution.

Arcan’s bodily and hyper-sexual language is thus surprisingly counter-discursive and empowering from a feminist standpoint. The only question remaining is, if her narrative is deeply unpleasing to read, why should people continue to do so (masochistic pleasure aside)? The power of her texts, after all, relies on a readership of sorts. One possible reason lies in the fact that, as Ben Alderson-Day, Marci Bernini and Charles Fernyhough point out, reading:

enhances (Kidd & Castano, 2013) readers’ theory-of-mind, i.e. the ability to represent the mental state of others. Indeed, it has been claimed that the ‘function’ of reading fiction may be to simulate social experiences involving other people (Mar & Oatley, 2008).<sup>532</sup>

In this sense, Arcan’s work enacts a primary function of fiction, in so far as readers are stimulated to vicariously live the social experiences of Arcan and a mass of men. Contrary to the views of Kidd and others however, Alderson *et al.* explain that readers make sense of characters and stories based on their own experiences, ‘that

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<sup>530</sup> Arcan claims that when writing, as with prostitution, she inevitably feels compelled to please the reader, and to ‘revêtir de mots ce qui se tient là-derrrière’. Arcan, *Burqa de chair*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>531</sup> Arcan, ‘Petit papa Noël’.

<sup>532</sup> Ben Alderson-Day, Marci Bernini and Charles Fernyhough, ‘Uncharted Features and Dynamics of Reading: Voices, Characters, and Crossing of Experiences’, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 49 (2017), 98-109 (p. 107).

has been referred to previously as “repertoire” (Iser, 1980), “encyclopedia” (Dolezel, 2000; Eco, 1984), or “experiential background” (Caracciolo, 2014; Herman, 2004).<sup>533</sup> Arcan’s texts, like Ernaux’s, enable readers to make some connection between her experiences and theirs, drawing from their personal sexual ‘encyclopaedia’ or ‘experiential background’ to gain an insight into Arcan’s world as sex-worker and writer. Like Ernaux’s corpus, the confessional content of the autofictional or autobiographical work matters in terms of its meaning for writer and reader both, granted that the writer’s experiences serve as the basis. Pleasure might seem too strong a word for a description of Arcan’s *Putain* (and indeed other prose works examined in this thesis). It is certainly not a comfortable read. Yet there is a form of enjoyment to be gained out of this meeting between reader and writer, through a transgressive moment of *jouissance*, and through a shared redigestion of her confessions, to extend Gwendoline’s metaphor.

If we allow ourselves to forget Arcan’s self-aggrandising and self-centred narratives in her interviews for a moment (her aims towards a unique status being, as discussed, to be taken with a pinch of salt like Rose’s in *A Ciel ouvert* [chapter one]), it is possible to conceive of her inward-looking work as having a much broader functionality. Arcan’s story, similarly to Ernaux’s, is not just reflective of her past and those of other sex-workers, but of all women’s histories. In reading her confessions, women can recognise their own repertoires of sexual oppression, and through a narrative that speaks of loneliness, find a common-ground across class and social difference, recognising their own abjection through that of the narrative voice. It is arguable that male clients of sex-workers are the only excluded members within this contract of readerly pleasure, since Arcan intimates that she wishes them to identify with the male clients who figure in her work, not the narrative voice (in fact, she draws a correlation between herself and their daughters instead).<sup>534</sup> Whilst she does not condemn the practise of prostitution outright, she condemns a lack of reflection particularly on the part of male clients,<sup>535</sup> something for which *Putain* provides ample opportunity. It is perhaps this reader whom Arcan wishes to undergo

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<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>534</sup> Ardisson, *op. cit.*

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

a transformation, through a reflective (and no doubt nauseous) reading, none of prostitution's pleasure or *jouissance* being permitted.

### **Conclusion**

The way in which Arcan presents her physical and textual body is paradoxical, as is the reception (incidental and intentional) of her corpus. Arcan's statements for the media often run counter to each other; she is at times shy and coy, at others provocatively sexualised and assertive; she reveals sexual preferences on occasion, and elsewhere insists that conversation focus exclusively on her literature. The dynamic between her and her audiences also varies drastically, Arcan being the subject of criticism, mockery, sympathy and admiration. The (auto)presentation of Arcan's textual and physical body in the media thus reinforces key areas of contradiction in her writing: her position as prostitute and writer, the inconsistent overlapping of fact and fiction, and her antithetical portrayal as victim and agent of her condition. A matter of great contention during Arcan's lifetime, these paradoxes have fuelled fiercer debate following her death, and arguably ensured enduring interest in her corpus and highly sexualised *corps*. The hunt for the real Nelly (or Isabelle or Cynthia) is one without an end. In any case, steps have been made (and will surely continue to be made) to dissuade critics from forming singular conclusions. Her premature departure from this world means that her textual corpus is left in a simultaneously vulnerable and infallible position. Conversely, her closely focalised descriptions of her bodily and sexual experience in her autofictional novels distinguish in no uncertain terms between what is true and invented. Yet her crude displays of her own body are written in such a way that it is the reader not she who finds themselves touched. Unlike the realm of prostitution and pornography, Arcan's body is off-limits in these works, the focus on the body culminates not in pleasure but nausea, and *jouissance* can only be arrived at through assimilation with the abject narrative voice. Both her revelatory and veiling strategies thus produce the same effect, simultaneously offering and protecting the authorial body (corporeal and textual), in death as well as life.

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between all three authors' *corps* and corpses are riddled with paradoxes. Ernaux shows us that the most intimate and truest self-portrait

necessitates a dissolution of the authorial *je*. Her minimalist form, moreover, designed to distance the cultivated reader, secures her place amongst the academic elite, and her subsequent media appearances solidify this middle-ground position. Further, despite differentiating herself from several feminist factions, and refusing to identify as a woman writer, her narration of bodily and sexual experience conveys creative ways of finding ‘the words to say’ her passions, in answer to the aims of feminists post-1968. As for content, she testifies to the oppressive social structures affecting women in France from the 1950s onwards, particularly surrounding sex, childbirth, abortion and ageing. The same is true of Huston, whose theorisation of nude modelling in *Poser nue* based on her experiences accounts for those of other models turned artists, as well as prostitutes and porn-stars, stretching the parameters of the nude genre to represent the pleasures and dangers inherent to female nudity and beauty. The term witch is an equally encompassing one in *Instruments*, enabling Huston to call out the mistreatment of women’s bodies across centuries of European history. Personal anecdotes lead to universal claims or complaints, and vice versa. Each case conveys a need to rethink the limits and possibilities of the body, particularly that of women. As for Arcan, her revelatory public appearances and narrative confessions render it impossible to know the real Nelly: she makes us look, but we cannot touch, the message being in Delvaux’s words: ‘essayez de deviner ce qui est vrai. Jamais vous n’y arriverez.’<sup>536</sup> In spite of this unknowability (or untouchability), the pleasure of reading Ernaux, Huston and Arcan’s works stems from identifying with the narrative voice (especially for women), and can produce a form of *jouissance*. In the case of Ernaux and Huston, this can lead to a type of transformation, through the culmination of Ernaux’s textual bodies and voices, or the transcending or criss-crossing of bodily borders by Huston and her characters. In Arcan’s, the only vaguely transformative alternative is one of nausea: either the author’s faced with a mass of men (*Putain*) or the inanity of life (*Paradis clef en main*), or that of the reader faced with their own reality (male clients being Arcan’s target). There is a strict economy of pleasure and *jouissance* whereby marginalised groups (whose experiences are akin to those of the author in terms of class [Ernaux], nudity [Huston] and sex [Arcan]) have a home and ‘les mots pour le dire’, and where dominant groups are instructed to watch and listen.

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<sup>536</sup> Martine Delvaux, ‘Nelly Arcan en série’, *Le Devoir*, 9 February 2017.

## Steady Wins the Race

This study of sexuality and corporeality within the erotic writing of Annie Ernaux, Nancy Huston and Nelly Arcan testifies to the diverse, inclusive and subversive quality of their literature from their earliest works to their most recent. I have examined a range of fictional, autofictional and non-fictional texts (along with supporting paratexts), including novels, autobiographies, critical essays, photo-texts, diaries, journals, illustrated *œuvres* and newspaper articles, that span a range of genres and deal with multiple disciplines, including philosophy, fine art, film and music. All of these texts encompass a variety of female figures too (teenage girls and elderly women, single and married mothers, spouses and lovers, prostitutes and porn-stars, witches and saints), and give a fictional voice to marginalised figures, namely those of different races, faiths or sexual orientation; from indigenous communities; and who are homeless, disabled or suffering from HIV/AIDs. These authors' portrayal of sexuality and corporeality is also one which strongly resists unilateral definitions of sex and the body. Throughout their works, the effects of sexual encounters exceed single places and fixed timeframes, crossing generations and nation-spaces. Human and other animal bodies melt into one another or the spaces around them, the boundary between reader, writer and written word becomes blurred, and gender roles and sexual clichés are thrown into question. Finally, their representation of men and women alike is one which challenges multiple dualisms, especially victimhood and agency, objectification and subjectivity, determinism and constructionism, the roles of observer and observed, self- and otherhood, masculinity and femininity, and the relationship between mind and body.

Unlike other Francophone women writing today, however, Ernaux, Huston and Arcan cannot be said to overstep binaries absolutely. In her conclusion to *The Becoming of the Body*, Damlé claims that contemporary women's writing in French is characterised by chaos. In particular, she concludes that the work of Amélie Nothomb, Ananda Devi, Marie Darrieussecq and Nina Bouraoui present feminine identity as being in a state of becoming, following the rhizomatic model of identity proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. In her words:

they are no longer merely motivated by reclaiming female voices, consolidating female identities and reinhabiting female bodies. Writing in an increasingly globalised and virtual world, they are drawn to



deterritorialisations. These authors explore subjectivity as a dynamic mode of passage, the body in perpetual becoming, the flux and folds of consciousness<sup>537</sup>

The work of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan is far removed from this chaotic turn in contemporary women's writing in French. Whilst they acknowledge and challenge binaries, this thesis has shown that their characters and narrative structures never move beyond them altogether, but rather recall their prevailing influence on specifically female voices, identities and bodies.

If anything, their literature emphasises the extreme difficulty of overcoming restrictive constructions of sexual and bodily identity. In chapter one, it was made clear that Ernaux, Huston and Arcan critique dominant sexual discourses, platforms and practices, and the damaging depiction or treatment of women which these encourage, but that all three bleakly imply that they cannot be avoided. And yet, each of them negotiates this apparent impasse by employing erotic language and tropes (those often deemed masculine or androcentric) to emphasise female pleasure and power in sex, and play with narrative form to solicit a female as well as a male gaze. They underline, for example, instances where women take the lead in sex or the production of erotic material and, conversely, moments where (consenting) submission proves enjoyable and liberating for women. In their erotic writing then, stereotypical, often male-orientated sexual and bodily structures are integrated within a feminist project and mediated by alternative, more empowering examples of feminine sexual and bodily experiences. Girls in Ernaux's (auto)fictional novels and other texts enjoy experimenting with the clothes they wear and the positions they adopt in sex (those characterised as feminine in popular films and magazines), but are not defined by them. Furthermore, Ernaux's co-authored photo-text marries photographs and texts by a man and woman to destabilise an unequal gender hierarchy and the gap between the pornographic and erotic. The pornographic genre is adopted by Huston too in order to undo many of the misogynist myths propagated, in her view, across centuries of pornographic literature. As for Arcan, the narrative voices in her work play on patterns from the sex and beauty industries to hold them

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<sup>537</sup> Amaleena Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2014), p. 184.

to account. Each of the studied authors thus exploits or mediates (but never relinquishes) dominant sexual discourses to advance a feminist thesis or purpose.

In the case of sexual difference discussed in chapter two, the studied authors explain that, whether they be socially constructed or biologically determined, gender conventions cannot help but inform the way we think and feel as men and women. Instead of negating so-called female drives and behaviours, these authors indicate the ways in which they can be creatively deployed to resist other stereotypes about women. Within her erotic triptych, Ernaux narrates with notable detail her formulaically feminine grooming habits and shopping expeditions during two love affairs, to de-sacralise and sexualise the figure of the middle-class, intellectual and older woman. In the case of Huston, she asserts in her non-fiction that sexual difference should not be denied but taken advantage of, men and women learning from each other's respective differences. Even in her fiction, where traditional gender roles are challenged to some degree, sexual difference is preserved. Or, rather, the parameters of sexual difference are opened-up to expand what is meant by the feminine. Vicki Kirby's reading of Irigaray's lexicon can serve our purposes here. Kirby considers the term labia as it appears in Irigaray's work to be a symbolic one, to be considered not in a literal sense – as the anatomical part of a woman – but as two brackets. These brackets, in turn, can be peeled back to encompass a whole host of different 'feminine' entities so that, as she puts it, 'nothing could be bracketed out'.<sup>538</sup> Likewise, Huston's strict definition of sexual difference within her non-fiction finds itself stretched in her fiction, with men acting in what she herself might deem feminine ways, and women eschewing traditionally female roles. For Arcan's part, her hyperbolic emphasis on biologically determined norms can be interpreted as a critical satire of the social construction of gender. Theories of sexual difference are thus preserved by all three authors, and imaginatively reinvented to discredit a determinist optic, or challenge similarly restrictive views concerning female sexuality.

In chapter three, the focus shifted to the limits involved in representing other women's sexual and bodily experiences. This chapter reflected on how Ernaux, Huston and Arcan self-consciously articulate the problem of speaking to other

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<sup>538</sup> Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 75.

women through literature in light of their relative privilege and a need to recognise differences of race, class, physical ability, employment, religion and culture. Ernaux's shift from an *intime* to an *extime* approach aptly reflects the difficulty of representing others *tout-court* (not just oneself-as-another), especially those of different faiths and social statuses; Huston's self-conscious narrative voices allude to the author's own anxieties in writing as a white middle-class Western author; Arcan verbalises her reticence when it comes to writing about people more marginalised than herself, based on the pressing need to tell her own story or those of women similarly exploited by the sex industry. The studied authors' portrayals of other women are thus deeply imbued with an awareness of the gaps between women's backgrounds and life experiences that make for vastly different perspectives on sex, sexuality and the body.

The final chapter of this thesis is perhaps that which gets closest to Damlé's vision of writerly chaos. The body in the work of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan was here shown to be a leaky one (or chaotic), with the body of the author, reader and text merging together, bodies melting or flying through time and space, and bodies being metaphysically connected to natural landscapes. The authors' positions nonetheless possess strong and identifiable roots, unlike Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. Ernaux insists that her understanding of sex and the body originates from her mother's education above all, sexual difference is crucial to Huston's theorisation of the nude and the women of her prose are connected by a definitively female epistemology and temporality, and Arcan's *corps* and corpus is extensively defined in relation to her *soi-disant* paradoxical position as prostitute and writer, an enigmatic binary which is fundamental to the lasting impact of her work.

In short, the representation of sexuality and corporeality in their work challenges several binaries and dangerous stereotypes about women, but never simply transcends them. Subversive gestures are enacted with an awareness in mind of past and current differences between the sexes, and the limitations to which women are still subjected by society and, even, themselves. Refreshingly, Huston reminds us that all feminist women have at times felt 'dans la mauvaise conscience, un tantinet "collabo"', struggling to 'satisfaire pleinement aux exigences de son

surmoi féministe'.<sup>539</sup> To put it bluntly, their erotic literature is not chaotic but cautious, not transcendental but grounded in an everyday, lived reality. In the words of Huston, 'nous jouons tous, et toujours, en fonction des cartes que nous avons en main [...]'.<sup>540</sup> Their works reflect as well as resist the very real forms of oppression and marginalisation which women have had to and continue to contend with, tentatively gesturing to a future when they might be no longer. Theirs is a mitigated form of hope. It is in this less radical vision of progress that I think lies the particularity and importance of these authors' erotic writing within a broader contemporary feminist mission.

Some might say the work of Arcan, in fact, leaves no room to believe in change at all given her nihilistic stance. But any complaint, particularly a collective one, can give us cause to dream. As Ahmed puts it in her introduction to 'Sexism – A Problem with a Name' where she speaks of an archive of women's bodies and voices against sexism: 'To struggle for an existence is to transform an existence. No wonder: there is hope in the assembly.'<sup>541</sup> To reapply Damlé's phrasing, Ernaux, Huston and Arcan all remain 'motivated by reclaiming female voices, consolidating female identities and reinhabiting female bodies', and the under- and misrepresentation of female voices, identities and bodies to which their work attests (explored chiefly in chapter one) indicates that this is still a vital exercise, decades after the second-wave move towards finding 'les mots pour le dire' (chapter four). Ernaux, Huston and Arcan deal with issues that continue to be associated with abjection or shame for women, such as menstruation, losing one's virginity, prostitution, pornography, abortion, having an affair and childbirth (particularly when out of wedlock). In so doing, they go a long way in filling in the lacunae within narratives on sex and the body (authored by men and women alike [chapter one]) and trouble the Madonna-whore complex in the process, because the *putains* they depict originate from a multitude of milieus and occupy a broad selection of

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<sup>539</sup> Nancy Huston, 'Le Féminisme comme éthique', *Le Genre humain*, 14.1 (1986), 161-174 (p. 173).

<sup>540</sup> Nancy Huston, *Ames et corps : Textes choisis 1981-2003* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2004), p. 205. This statement is made largely in reference to beauty, but I find it equally fitting when thinking about gender inequality that Huston addresses in the same chapter ('La Donne'), mainly in terms of sexual assault and harassment.

<sup>541</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'Introduction: Sexism – A Problem with a Name', *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Politics*, 86 (2015), 5-13 (p. 13)

societal positions. The studied authors also employ erotic language which they deem to have been historically colonised by male writers, and celebrate female pleasure and desire which has all too often been vilified, as their work reveals. If these authors have not moved beyond a preoccupation with the depiction of female voices, identities and bodies, it is because this still constitutes a recalcitrant act.

Moving beyond these conclusions, there is still much to be said about these authors' works. Building on this theme of insubordination, a short study could be conducted on the recurrence of stains and spillages in their works. The prevalence of (menstrual) blood, semen and milk is reminiscent of Chawaf's demands for women's writing (chapter two), and whilst feminists in France, Quebec and elsewhere in the Francophonie are, at best, wary of the present relevance of *écriture féminine*, emphasising the physicality of sexual intercourse and other bodily events is still a powerful tool for women writers, as a means of legitimising female desire, organic processes and their right to write about lust and love in a visceral sense. One might also be tempted to perceive their written works as a series of stains or ink blots in themselves – to bring in Arcan's deep-seated preoccupation with the work of the unconscious – which readers are invited to interpret in accordance with their own memories (chapter one).

One could also extend the interdisciplinary outlook of this thesis by undertaking a comprehensive study of stage productions born out of these authors' works;<sup>542</sup> *L'Autre* by Pierre Trividic and Patrick Mario Bernard (2008) – a cinematic

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<sup>542</sup> Previous productions are as follows: Jeanne Champagne, *La Femme gelée*, Théâtre du Chaudron, 2002.;  
Panchika Velez, *Se perdre*, Argua Théâtre, Dax, 2002.;  
Panchika Velez, *Passion simple*, Argua Théâtre, Dax, 2002.;  
Zabo, *Passion simple*, Agen, 2007.;  
Jean-Michel Rivinoff, *L'Évènement*, Théâtre Girasole, Festival d'Avignon, 2011.;  
Jean-Michel Rivinoff, *L'Immigrée de l'intérieur*, Centre dramatique national d'Orléans, 2011 ; Le Mans, 2013. Based on *La Place*, *L'Évènement*, *Les Années*, *La Femme gelée*, *Les Armoires vides* and *La Honte*.;  
Hugues Demorge, *La Vie extérieure*, Théâtre 95 de Cergy, 2014.;  
Laurence Cordier and David d'Aquaro, *Le quat'sous*, Théâtre national de Bordeaux en Aquitaine, 2016. Based on *Les Armoires vides*, *Une Femme* and *La Honte*.;  
Catherine Marnas, *Lignes de faille*, Théâtre du rond point, 2015.;  
Ahmed Madani, *Fille du paradis*, Le Festival off d'Avignon, 2011. Based on *Putain*. ;  
Marie Brassard, *La Fureur de ce que je pense*, Espace Go, 2013. Based on a wide selection of Arcan's writings.

adaptation of *L'Occupation* –;<sup>543</sup> a ten-part radio series of *Les Années* (2016);<sup>544</sup> theatre pieces envisaged by Huston (*Angela et Marina*, produced with Valérie Grail [2002],<sup>545</sup> *Jocaste reine* [2009]<sup>546</sup> and *Klatch avant le ciel* [2011]);<sup>547</sup> the 1998 film *Voleur de vie* and *Emporte-moi* (1999)<sup>548</sup> for which she wrote the screenplays (acting as a teacher in the second); Jean Chabot's 1995 production *Sans raison apparente* in which she features as a writer;<sup>549</sup> her literary concerts and CDs;<sup>550</sup> and Annie Emond's recent cinematographic homage to the life of Arcan, named simply *Nelly* (2016) (chapter four). This would be an apt way of elaborating on the *corps-corpus* dialectic discussed in chapter four. One could also expand further upon the generic range of this thesis by looking to children's books by Huston as well. Interestingly, she has collaborated with her daughter Léa to produce *Vera veut la vérité* and *Dora demande des détails* (2013) for L'École des loisirs, and her son Sacha to write *Mascarade* (2008) for Actes Sud's junior theatrical collection, adding an intergenerational dynamic to corpus production. An analysis of these three works could shed new light on Huston's theorisations of feminine appearance too (chapter two), and be strategically compared to her fairytale for adults, *La Fille poilue*.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> *L'Autre*, dir. by Pierre Trividic and Patrick Mario Bernard (Agat Films and Ex Nihilo, 2008)

<sup>544</sup> Sophie Lemp and Etienne Vallès, *Les Années*, Feuilleton, *France Culture*, 2016.

<sup>545</sup> Nancy Huston, *Angela et Marina*, dir. by Valérie Grail (Arles : Actes Sud, 2002)

<sup>546</sup> Nancy Huston, *Jocaste reine* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2009)

<sup>547</sup> Nancy Huston, *Klatch avant le ciel* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2011)

<sup>548</sup> *Voleur de vie*, dir. by Yves Angelo (TF1, 1998) and *Emporte-moi*, dir. by Léa Pool (Artistic License Films, 1999).

<sup>549</sup> *Sans raison apparente*, dir. by Jean Chabot (ONF-NFB Canada, 1995)

<sup>550</sup> *Le Mâle entendu* (chapter four) and:

Nancy Huston and Ralph Petty, *Démons quotidiens*, 27 Rue Jacob Paris, 2011. Based on text of the same name by Huston.;

Nancy Huston, with Olivier Hussenet and others, *Lisières*, 27 Rue Jacob Paris, 2011. Based on text of the same name by Huston.;

Nancy Huston and Edouard Feriet, *Rena et les monothéismes*, Festival littéraire au Québec en toutes lettres, Chapelle musée de l'Amérique francophone, 2013. Based on *Infrarouge*.;

Nancy Huston and Claude Barthélemy, *Nancy Huston raconte et chante Ultraviolet* (Thierry Magnier, 2013). Based on a children's novel of same name by Huston, published the year before: Nancy Huston, *Ultraviolet* (Paris : Thierry Magnier, 2012);

Nancy Huston, with Freddy Eichelberger and others, *Pérégrinations Goldberg* (Naive Records, 2000). Based on Nancy Huston, *Les Variations Goldberg* (Paris : Seuil, 1981).

<sup>551</sup> Nancy Huston, *La Fille Poilue*, with paintings by Guy Oberson (Paris : Chemin de fer, 2016)

Space and time would be additionally pertinent elements to take into consideration in relation to their erotic writing. Christine Detrez and Anne Simon refer to space as a type of ‘pense-bête’ that organises itself into gendered categories.<sup>552</sup> According to Bourdieu, we are corporeally connected to these gendered spaces, and it is through them that we come to ‘lire le monde’.<sup>553</sup> In the case of Ernaux, spaces are clearly demarcated according to gender too, with Denise Lesur’s mother in *Les Armoires vides* taking care of the *épicerie* and her father being in charge of the *café*,<sup>554</sup> and Ernaux comes to understand gender based on how the women in her life interact with the spaces around them. For one, Ernaux’s mother’s brash behaviour and presence as worker within the familial and professional space is juxtaposed to her mother-in-law’s meekness and reserve within a domestic setting (chapter two), a reminder of Susan Bordo’s point that women are taught not to take up space.<sup>555</sup> Femininity is thus associated with spatial restraint. We also saw how spaces are hugely important to Ernaux’s commenting on class and social status, to her observation of others (the *non-lieu* providing an ideal observatory), and she ultimately professes that writing constitutes her *vrai lieu*. In her article ‘Annie Ernaux, 1989’, moreover, Kawakami compares Ernaux’s pre-writing diary entries (*L’Atelier noir*) with her published diary entries (*Se perdre*) produced on the same dates, examining the differences in terms of perspective and content (the former about writing, the latter about love and longing).<sup>556</sup> Space and time are conceptualised in more abstract terms in Huston and Arcan’s work. Their characters escape to other worlds and time-zones during rendez-vous with clients or sittings for artists, by way of daydreams, and both authors frequently reference the cosmos and infinity. As Boisclair *et al.* point out, future literary criticism of Arcan would do well

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<sup>552</sup> Christine Detrez and Anne Simon, *A Leur corps défendant : Les Femmes à l’épreuve du nouvel ordre moral* (Paris : Seuil, 2006), p. 98.

<sup>553</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris : Seuil, 1980), p. 129.

<sup>554</sup> Detrez and Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 99. I have taken the liberty of correcting a minor error in Detrez and Simon’s analysis, who refer to Denise Lesur’s parents in *La Honte*, whilst they actually figure in Ernaux’s novel *Les Armoires vides*.

<sup>555</sup> Susan R. Bordo, ‘The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault’, in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. by Susan R. Bordo and Alison M. Jaggard (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989), pp. 13-34.

<sup>556</sup> Akane Kawakami, ‘Annie Ernaux, 1989: Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 53.2 (2014), 232-246 (pp. 244-246).

to enlarge on the relevance of temporality in her work (though several studies have been completed about space).<sup>557</sup> Sharing spaces also throws up interesting questions to do with agency, healing, solidarity and paternalism across her corpus, as with the surgery in *A Ciel ouvert*, the psychotherapist's bureau in *Putain* and the confessional in *Paradis, clef en main*. These prove to be claustrophobic and exclusionary on the one hand, and surprisingly liberating on the other in terms of what they allow female characters to achieve and with whom they manage to connect. Huston's personal and literary interest in transnationalism, moreover, warrants an evaluation of the erotic in her work in relation to linguistic and geographical shifts, beautifully conveyed in her novel *Lignes de faille* (2006), of which the transgenerational and anti-chronological form could make for equally fascinating insights.<sup>558</sup> I would therefore recommend a comparative study of sex and the body in all three of the authors' works in terms of space and time, though its breadth exceeds the capacity of this project.

The impact of motherhood in their erotic writing could make for a separate thesis in itself. The mother figure in Ernaux's autobiographies is crucial, since it is her mother who inspires her understanding of femininity and feminism, her mother is often described in connection to sexual experience, and she outlines many of her mother's intimate and bodily moments, particularly those connected with ageing.<sup>559</sup> As for Huston, the maternal – as I have touched upon in this thesis – is a primary running thread. She is ever eager to sexualise the mother figure, and to celebrate the generative potential of pregnancy and childbirth in terms of artistic creation. She presents pregnancy and childcare in her critical essays as fundamentally feminine realms to be venerated (though her fiction demonstrates that not all women are *de facto* born with a maternal instinct [chapter two]). The mother is allegorically configured as a *larve* in Arcan's autofictional corpus, antagonistically posed against the *schtroumpfette*; a more complex contribution to the Madonna-whore complex, in that another layer of abjection is brought forward (chapter two). This disturbing rendering of the maternal figure could benefit from extensive unpicking: if the *larve*

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<sup>557</sup> Isabelle Boisclair, with Christina Chung and others, 'Avant-propos', in *Nelly Arcan : Trajectoires Fulgurantes*, ed. by Isabelle Boisclair and others (Montréal : Remue-Ménage, 2017), pp. 11-24 (p. 20).

<sup>558</sup> Nancy Huston, *Lignes de faille* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2006)

<sup>559</sup> See especially Annie Ernaux, *Une Femme* (Paris : Gallimard, 1989).



figure symbolises female destiny (chapter two), where do we go from there? Is death the only way out of this ultimate end-point? And if so, is such a notion simply another example amongst many of Arcan's extensive hyperbole and satire? And in that case, why denigrate the mother figure so dramatically in the process? Is there more to this derisive portraiture than its satirical function?

To finish on a less ambiguous note, a comparative study could be undertaken between the erotic writing of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan and those of their partners, namely that of Philippe Vilain (*L'Étreinte* [1997], in which he recounts his love affair with Ernaux following her own two-page summary of their sexual 'art-piece' [chapters two and four]); Tzvetan Todorov (perhaps *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien : Enquête sur le siècle* [2000])<sup>560</sup> to build on Huston's fascination with time); numerous monographs, catalogues and illustrated texts by or about Oberson,<sup>561</sup> and the tract on pornography produced by Arcan's ex mentioned in *Folle* (if anyone were able to verify its existence, that is). For a less restrictive study, their work could also be compared to erotic male writers more generally, such as those of Nikos Kokantzis (*Giocanda* [2014]) and Robert Bly (*L'Homme sauvage et l'enfant* [1990]) mentioned by Huston in *Sois belle / sois fort* alongside those of Arcan and Ernaux (she recommends that they all be studied in schools).<sup>562</sup> The (auto)biographies of Emmanuel Carrère, who opts for a similarly immersive and sociologically-driven form to that of Ernaux ever since *L'Adversaire* (2000),<sup>563</sup> and *D'Autres vies que la mienne* by the same author (in which he tells the tale of his sister) could be interesting to compare to Ernaux's *journaux extimes*. Ernaux's work could be even more usefully examined in relation to those of Edouard Louis, described as the 'Héritier d'Annie Ernaux' because his singularity, his difference to his home peers and family members impels him to write.<sup>564</sup> Ernaux also recently published a chapter

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<sup>560</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien : Enquête sur le siècle* (Paris : Laffont, 2000)

<sup>561</sup> Full bibliography available at Guy Oberson, 'Bibliographie – Publications', in *guyoberson.com* <[www.guyoberson.com](http://www.guyoberson.com)> [accessed 25 June 2018].

<sup>562</sup> Nancy Huston, *Sois belle / sois fort* (Artignosc-sur-Verdon : Parole, 2016), p. 48.

<sup>563</sup> Nelly Kaprièlan, "'Mémoire de fille' d'Annie Ernaux : Est-ce que cette fille c'est moi ? Qui étais-je ?", *Les Inrockuptibles*, 4 March 2016.

<sup>564</sup> Laurence Houout, "'Histoire de la violence' : Edouard Louis n'en a pas fini avec Eddy Bellegueule", *Culturebox*, 9 February 2016.

in *Pierre Bourdieu : L'Insoumission en héritage*, which Louis edited.<sup>565</sup> Like Ernaux, moreover, his writing is infused with a strong class-consciousness. To nuance the emphasis on female readership in the final chapter of this thesis, moreover, a study of the impact on male readers, and of the relationship between male readers, the writers and their works could be invaluable. As Olivier Bessard-Banquy states in *Sexe et littérature aujourd'hui*, men can enjoy learning from female erotica as a means of learning about female sexuality,<sup>566</sup> in keeping with Huston's views on the need for an exchange of sexual practices between men and women (chapter two).

Bessard-Banquy speaks of women's sexuality in terms of mystery, magic and enigma which men are at pains to work out. Rather worryingly however, he closes his hypothesis with the following statement:

En se plongeant dans des récits grivois au féminin, le sexe fort a l'impression de visiter en cachette la chambre d'une jeune fille, de découvrir le grand livre de ses petits secrets, d'explorer tout à loisir les arcanes de sa sensualité complexe dans l'espoir d'en dissiper une fois pour toutes l'indéchiffrable énigme.<sup>567</sup>

Bessard-Banquy's voyeuristic scene points to the finalisation of a worn-out heterosexual fantasy: to access the secrets of female pleasure and desire so that the beautiful young woman may, at last, be wholly possessed. The portrayal of female sexual and bodily experience and identity in the literature of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan resists such a reading. Their literature encompasses women of all ages, who are willing to take up space (they are not constrained to the private sphere, as the young girl is to a bedroom in Bessard-Banquy's image), and the multiplicity and indeed contradictory nature of their sexual and corporeal representation precludes the 'énigme' of feminine sensuality from being fully understood, let alone reduced to clichés inspired by men. The feminine magic and mystery within their literature is such that it can never be contained, and their readers are never presented with fixed answers. Instead, they are invited to explore the rich and irreducible potential of female

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<sup>565</sup> Annie Ernaux, 'La Distinction, œuvre totale et révolutionnaire', in *Pierre Bourdieu : L'Insoumission en héritage*, ed. by Edouard Louis (Paris : PU France, 2013), pp. 17-48.

<sup>566</sup> Olivier Bessard-Banquy, *Sexe et littérature aujourd'hui* (Paris : La Musardine, 2010), pp. 78-79.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*

sexuality and corporeality, which social borders have yet to make room for. Though women's sexuality and corporeality remain depressingly curtailed, the work of Ernaux, Huston and Arcan offers us astonishing and heartening examples of women circumnavigating socio-political confines, working their magic to make the best of a frequently bad situation, and paving the way for a day when 'what is dealt'<sup>568</sup> leaves women with a fairer hand.

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<sup>568</sup> Taken from Huston's translated version of 'La Donne'. Nancy Huston, 'Dealing with what's Dealt', in *The New Salmagundi Reader*, ed. by Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996), pp. 607-619 (p. 619).

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